

IMPOSSIBLE DIFFERENCE:  
“WRITING” AND THE QUESTION OF COMMUNITY IN  
MODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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This dissertation contests indiscriminate valorization of “difference” and its cognates in postcolonial discourse by shifting attention to the ontological “impossibility of difference” of postcoloniality and to the ethical demand born of such an ontological consideration. The study begins with an analysis of Charles Baudelaire’s treatment of the ethos of sameness in his lesbian poems. My argument is that at a time when the conceptualization of difference is assuming formative importance in modernity’s political philosophy, cultural imaginary, and epistemology, Baudelaire’s work is already undermining the Self-Other demarcation. The reason for my extending the scope retroactively to European modernity is that Baudelaire’s time, as I view it, marks a historical juncture where the Self-Other dynamic begins to materialize a certain episteme by assuming a material “content.”

Then, spanning the work of writers from a wide range of areas including Salman Rushdie (Indian British), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (Korean American), and Dancing Crane (Taiwanese), this study examines, in particular, the way in which these writers approach the impossibility of difference by problematizing the concept and praxis of writing. That is, writing assumes a quasi-ontological status and functions as the site where the postcolonial subject materializes his/her conception of “community.” The governing argument of the study is that the singular reliance on the singularized Self-Other model in the construction of postcolonial theory risks neglecting the relationship between the self and the collective, which too constitutes a crucial portion of the subject’s ethico-political experience. Secondly, since the Self-

Other model is conventionally premised on a power relation, sanctification of this model as the prominent language in postcolonial theory risks losing sight of postcolonial theory's own limitations, especially the confinement of political idioms. I argue that to consider postcoloniality in light of "community" is to configure postcoloniality not merely as a historical juncture but as a futurist episteme anticipating an emancipatory agenda that can break out of the dilemma of the idiom of difference and difference-driven identity politics. Theorists discussed in this study include Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Emmanuel Levinas.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Chun-yen Jo Chen was born and grew up in Hsinchu, Taiwan. She received her B.A. and M.A. in Foreign Languages and Literatures from National Taiwan University. At Cornell, she specializes in postcolonial theory and twentieth-century Anglophone literature while developing other interests including questions of ethics and community, critical theory, globalization theory, modernism, and Taiwan literature. She has worked as a news writer, translator, and simultaneous interpreter in Taiwan and the U.S. and has taught in the Department of East Asian Studies at Princeton University as a full-time lecturer.

*for my parents*

*Ching-wen Chen & Rui-lan Chang Chen*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Writing and Difference, Postcolonial Style

*Iterability: the working out of the logic that ties repetition to alterity.*

--Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc.

In his attempt to dismantle metaphysics, Jacques Derrida recovers the originary place of “writing” by showing that writing, topographically and tropologically, points to the constitutiveness of *différance* (the temporal and referential “imprecision” of signification) in the configuration of being. In this dissertation, writing too plays an originary role, but it is deployed to contest the primacy of the idiom of difference in postcolonial discourse.

Difference, to be sure, has been a predominant conceptual axis along which the discursivity of postcolonial considerations is established. Frantz Fanon, for instance, famously unearths the mechanism of desire in colonialist racial differentiation (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Edward Said takes issue with the ideology of difference in the two-way transaction between knowledge and power in Orientalist narratives (*Orientalism*). On the other hand, Homi Bhabha construes cultural difference as a universal ambivalence and ambivalent universal (*Location of Culture*), while for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the difference figured in the sexed/racialized subaltern subject names the aporia of representation (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*).

To be crudely strategic here, I argue that these prominent theorists’ work has inspired and developed into two major trajectories of postcolonial theory. The first one, to a great extent, has absorbed the momentum of previous “empowering discourses” (feminism, ethnic studies, minority discourse) and foregrounds an identity politics

facilitated by the idiom of difference and its cognates including heterogeneity, diversity, plurality, locality, and specificity.<sup>1</sup> Despite repeated criticism against the homogenizing tendency of postcolonialist practices (see, for example, McClintock 294, 302-303; and Shohat), numerous postcolonial-theory practitioners still posit the rhetoric of difference (heterogeneity of identity, plurality of subject-positions, geopolitical and historical specificity) as the foremost paradigm in postcolonial considerations.<sup>2</sup>

The other major trajectory is primarily predicated upon the overdetermination of postcoloniality by the colonial experience, the culture of imperialism, or, in Bhabha's words, "the affect of hybridity" (120). As Spivak suggests in a double move which defines both postcoloniality and globality, "Post-colonial pedagogy must teach the overdetermined play of cultural value in the inscription of the socius. Such unacknowledged appropriative overdeterminations are the substance of contemporary globality" ("Foundations" 165).

Such a distinction, however, is not tantamount to suggesting that these two trajectories do not intersect. For one thing, the idiom of difference in effect also plays

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<sup>1</sup> On postcolonialism's self-claimed congeniality to minority discourse, see, for example, Homi K. Bhabha's consideration of the necessary performativity of postcolonial struggles pivoted upon minority differences: "The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power and privilege does not depend on the persistence of tradition; it is resourced by the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (2; emphasis in the original). Or, see Stuart Hall ("Culture") and R. Radhakrishnan ("Ethnic"; "Postcoloniality") for their argumentations on the politics of identity in relation to the postcolonial. Both, for instance, conceptualize affirmative postcolonial identities as ethnicity-informed identification; both emphasize the productive and creative aspects of identity formation. Radhakrishnan, in particular, emphasizes a relationship of continuity between colonialism and nationalism, and between nationalism and its "significant Other," namely the diaspora (753). Also see Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani; Linda Hutcheon, "Circling"; Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge 407-408; and Masao Miyoshi.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Deepika Bahri 53, 55; David Theo Goldberg; Ania Loomba xvi, 14-19; Catherine Hall 76; Lawson and Tiffin 230-35; Mijay Mishra 42-43; Padmini Mongia, Introduction 1-3; R. Radhakrishnan, "Postcoloniality" 753; Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz 150.

a decisive role in the second trajectory wherein the Derridean difference translates into key notions such as hybridity and radical singularity. Furthermore, although my working division-definition, for the sake of clarity, pins down the first trajectory as if it pivoted merely around a commonplace sense of “difference,” I concede that progressive minority-discourse practitioners have begun to adjust their identity politics in accordance with the Derridean signature notion—that is, they acknowledge the incommensurability of identity and seek a shift from conventional identity politics of authenticity and representativeness to a politics of heterogeneity (see, for example, R. Radhakrishnan, “Ethnic”; and Asian American critics discussed in Chapter Four). It can even be argued that the real “mainstream” postcolonial theory prevailing at present is nothing other than a syncretism. Aijaz Ahmad, for example, has noted that the predominant tendency in cultural criticism of today, which he finds problematic, is “to waver constantly between the opposing polarities of cultural differentialism and cultural hybridity” (“Politics” 289). From a more sympathetic perspective, on the other hand, Stuart Hall combines the two trajectories in his deliberation on the past, present, and future of postcoloniality:

. . . while holding fast to differentiation and specificity, we cannot afford to forget the over-determining effects of the colonial moment, the “work” which its binaries were constantly required to do to *re-present* the proliferation of cultural difference and forms of life, which were always there, within the sutured and over-determined “unity” of that simplifying, over-arching binary, “the West and the Rest.” . . . We have to keep these two ends of the chain in play at the same time—over-determination and difference, condensation and dissemination—if we are not to fall into a playful deconstructionism, the fantasy of a

powerless *utopia* of difference. (“When” 249; emphasis in the original)<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, my point of making the division while noting the popular syncretism is to draw attention to the fact that the idiom of difference, in the final instance, remains a definitive pivotal point in most critical paradigms in postcolonial theory. I argue that this conflation of different ramifications under the generic term “difference” only defuses the urgency of several critical problems that postcolonial theory has yet to resolve. First of all, the rhetoric of difference (especially that in use in difference-driven identity politics) oftentimes only ends up entrenching a subject-object dichotomy and mistaking this dichotomy for a power unevenness that can be redressed by an act of renaming (to name someone/something a “subject” is to allocate him/her/it a power-position). Second of all, some discourses of difference emphatically invoke deconstructionist resonance while at the same time still operating within conventional identity politics, the kind of subject-object dichotomy mentioned just now being a telling example. Thirdly, the idiom of difference, for the most part, is deployed to serve discourses and practices of politics, that is, power relations involving negotiations and contestations for sites of signification. As a result, critical paradigms centered around the rhetoric of difference in postcolonial theory tend to neglect any non-political parameters. Or, due to the pre-history of postcolonial theory vis-à-vis the faulty universalism of Eurocentric mechanisms, postcolonial theory has fostered a repugnance for anything associated with universality.

These concerns constitute the departure point for my inquiry. To be brief, I contest indiscriminate valorization of “difference” and its cognates in postcolonial discourse, and I approach this issue by shifting attention to the ontological aspect of

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout the dissertation, all the ellipsis points in quotations indicate my own omissions unless otherwise noted.

postcoloniality (“ontological” in its general sense) and the ethical demand born of such an ontological consideration. My argumentation may resemble Spivak’s and Bhabha’s in that we all conceptualize postcoloniality as being overdetermined by the culture of imperialism or the colonial experience.<sup>4</sup> Yet I depart from them by postulating the valence of the concept of “community” in the postcolonial condition: “community” not as a concrete group-scape prescribed and delimited by any political identification, but as an ethical intersubjective possibility insofar as the ethical experience inscribes a non-“Self-consolidating” relationship with the other(s); “community” not in the sense of an imagination, which Benedict Anderson famously suggests (*Imagined Communities*), but in the sense of “being-with” that Jean-Luc Nancy puts forward.

Nancy’s notion of community is predicated upon an ontological understanding of beings in a political collective—that is, their mutual exposure to the alterity inscribed in each being grounds their commonality; finitude is what they share. If identity politics is concerned with the play of power and negotiation of social resources (what Nancy terms *la politique* or “politics”), Nancy’s proposition engages with what is at stake in the very fact of *being* in common (*le politique* or “the political”). To incorporate such pre-subjective ontological thinking as Nancy’s into

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<sup>4</sup> I appropriate the term “overdetermination” in its general sense, in the sense in which postcolonial theorists Bhabha and Spivak have used them. Bhabha’s propositions on hybridity and ambivalence, for instance, emphatically foreground the mutual complicity of the colonial subjectivity and the colonized subjectivity. Spivak, who describes imperialism as a structure which “one critiques yet inhabit intimately,” has pointed out that “the everyday here and now named ‘postcoloniality’” articulates the same experience of inhabiting-critiquing (“Foundations” 158). In my project, I define postcolonial overdetermination as the condition wherein the postcolonial subject’s self formation is constantly confronted with an intense matrix of cultural and linguistic codes related to the colonial heritage. On the other hand, I also draw on one particular aspect of Louis Althusser’s famous proposition on overdetermination, that is, the overdetermination of the real relationship (between men and their conditions of existence) by the imaginary relationship and of the imaginary by the real (233-34). My conception of an overdetermined postcoloniality, thus, also refers to the network of cultural and linguistic codes that is *imagined* to constitute postcolonial reality and postcolonial cognition of history, often with “national allegory” as the epitome of such a coding. The latter point will be elaborated in Chapter Three.

postcolonial studies, then, is to clear open a space in any consideration of politics (*la politique*) as a reminder of the latter's constitutive limitation. This move is significant if we wish to consider postcoloniality not merely as a historical juncture but as a futurist episteme anticipating an emancipatory agenda. For one thing, the attention to the question of community can redress the problem caused by the singular reliance on the singularized Self-Other model in current postcolonial theory, which risks neglecting the relationship between the self and the collective. Second of all, the Self-Other model long sanctified in postcolonial studies is premised primarily on power relations (*la politique*) and therefore risks losing sight of postcolonial theory's own limitations. Propositions like Nancy's remind postcolonial-theory practitioners of the necessity of heeding questions beyond the political parameters.

In my opening chapter, I will examine the work of Nancy together with the ethical proposal put forward by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, proposing to span their thinking with postcolonial inquiries. I will also provide an overview of the issues I wish my project to be conversant with. I organize these issues in the form of a few polarities: specificity versus singularity, universality versus particularity, hybridity versus diversity, and ethics versus politics. As mentioned above, since postcolonial discourse arises out of a critique of Eurocentric universalism, postcolonial discourse tends to resist certain vocabulary such as universality and ethics. By examining current propositions regarding universality, singularity, particularity, and ethics, I suggest reopening discussions on some of the ordained "dos" and "don'ts" in postcolonial studies in order to reevaluate the place of the field in relation to other critical inquiries in the humanities.

This dissertation project spans the work of writers from a wide range of areas in the spirit of comparative case-studies, including the work of Salman Rushdie, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Taiwan writer Wu He (denoting "Dancing Crane,"

pseudonym of Chen Guocheng). These writers form a conceptual framework for me not only because they all happen to configure postcoloniality as an overdetermined inscription, but also because, significantly, they all approach this question of overdetermination by problematizing the concept and praxis of writing. That is, writing assumes a quasi-ontological status and emerges as the site where the postcolonial subject performs and contests his/her conception of “community.” I focus, henceforth, on the relationship between the material characteristics of writing and the historical impulse articulated by this materiality. In Rushdie, for instance, proliferated allegorical determinants name the very symptom of postcoloniality’s overdetermination. Yet Rushdie, as I will demonstrate, eventually undoes the pedagogical violence of an overloaded language and an overloaded history—not by resisting or ignoring these allegorical determinants, but by treading through them. In *Cha*, I examine how her treatment of a haunted history is reflected in a narrative haunted by the most radical Other, namely death. Like Rushdie, her proposition is not to posit an antagonistic stand or to exorcise the ghostly unknown Other, but to live with the haunting and also to live with the others in the community whether or not the latter are graspable within parameters of conventional representation. In *Dancing Crane*, I examine the way in which his writing demonstrates a possible ethical experience through a writing of simultaneity, a writing of a community not predicated upon any identifiable category.

Yet in order to foreground the significance of contesting the primacy of “difference” epistemo-ontologically and ethically, I begin my textual study with an analysis of Charles Baudelaire’s treatment of the lesbian subject. The reason for my extending the scope retroactively to European modernity is that Baudelaire’s time, as I view it, marks a historical juncture where the Self-Other dynamic begins to materialize a certain episteme by assuming a material “content.” The capitalist desire that



Baudelaire addresses within a domestic context has not only a metaphoric but also a metonymic relationship with the European colonialist desire spreading abroad. More significantly, at a time when the conceptualization of difference is assuming formative importance in modernity's political philosophy, cultural imaginary, and epistemology, Baudelaire's work, at the forefront of high modernity, is already undermining the Self-Other, subject-object demarcation. In his poems on heterosexual love, the collapse of the subject-object line is tinged with the male poetic persona's desire-charged ambivalence and manipulation. In the Lesbian Poems, however, the male persona boldly announces his identification with the female homosexual other. Baudelaire's evocation of sameness, I will propose, figures as an ethical possibility wherein the self attends to the radical other for the sake of the other.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Postcolonial Intersections<sup>1</sup>

*What cannot be treated, what is not manageable once and for all, and what is forgotten by political treatment in its constitution of a “commonality” of humans by dint of their belonging to the same polis, is the very thing that is not shareable among them, what is not communicable or communal or common at all. Call it birth and/or death, or even singularity.*

*--Jean-François Lyotard, “A l’insu (Unbeknownst)”*

In the first half of this chapter, I examine the conceptual fundamentals underlying the work of four theorists, Peter Hallward, Ernesto Laclau, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, holding that their theoretical apparatuses posit important questions pertinent to the future of postcolonial theory. If anything, these theorists all address the efficacy of universals vs. particulars in cultural critique. Hallward and Laclau, employing very different idioms, both argue for the valence of universalism associated with political modernity. On the other hand, Bhabha’s and Spivak’s now canonized writings also exude an openness to some sort of universality in their privileging of radical difference (either as hybridity or as the subaltern subjectivity). To gauge the limits of the vocabulary of difference in current postcolonial studies, I

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<sup>1</sup> This title is inspired by a chapter title in Peter Childs and Patrick Williams’ *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, “Post-colonial Intersections,” where they examine the contact points between postcolonial theory and other critical practices on issues of language, gender, race, and nationalism (185-226). Also see Bart Moore-Gilbert (185-203) for his discussion of postcolonial theory’s interface with other critical positions. Moore-Gilbert proposes a Spivakian “strategic essentialism” (which he believes can avoid subordinating any critical discourse to any other in the struggle for cultural decolonization) coupled with a spirit of alliance among different political movements.

argue, is to reconsider the validity of those theoretical terms tabooed in the field, such as universality.

In the second half of the chapter, I proceed to explore the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Emmanuel Levinas. As argued in the Introduction, the communitarian configuration they put forward can help bring into light the conceptual other of postcolonial theory at two fronts: the Self-Other dynamic and the problematic of representation.

### **I. The Specific vs. the Singular; the Specific vs. the Specified**

Among recent critiques of postcolonial theory, Hallward's 2001 book, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific*, presents a forceful argumentation on the formal foundations of the discipline. Hallward takes issue with the tendency of "singularization" in contemporary postcolonial theory, which he defines as a mode of thinking that operates in accordance with its self-created logic and acts in the absence of any external criteria for its self-configuration. It is, henceforth, an epistemo-ontological condition inapplicable to other historical circumstances: "Singular configurations replace the interpretation or representation of reality with an immanent participation in its production or creation" (xii; emphasis in the original).

In a slightly confusing way, what is generally termed "specific" in other critical paradigms belongs to the singular mode in Hallward's system while the alternative he posits is categorized as the "specific." His specific mode operates "through the active negotiation of relations and the deliberate taking of sides, choices and risks, in a domain and under constraints that are external to these takings" (xii). Simply put, the specific mode of historical cognition is informed and constituted by

certain external principles that one takes in consciously. The specific is relational while the singular is self-generating.

Behind Hallward's adamant distinction between the specific and the singular lies his belief in certain "external" criteria that any historical cognition ought to reach and establish formal relationships with. These criteria include freedom from determination, the ability to think, and the ability to make genuine decisions—in a word, the process of becoming a subject in the rational logic of modernity. To attain genuine emancipatory political goals, according to him, is to arrive at this genuine stage of subject-formation. To achieve this subjectivity *qua* rationality, furthermore, is to think relationally and universally. Born of the "relational" dimension is the tenet of "the specific" as opposed to the singular. Born of the "universal" dimension, on the other hand, is a resistance to "the specified," which Hallward defines as a historical determination that objectifies the otherwise potential subject by pinning down the latter within terms of a specifying and essentializing category, such as class, race, gender, or nation (48-50). Any particular political claim can transform into true emancipation, Hallward maintains, only when the claim has established a universality applicable to everyone. It is also in this spirit that Hallward finds inadequate current postcolonial theory's tendency of over-contextualization and its religious fetishization of particularity: "That everything exists as specific to a situation does not mean that its significance and complexity is reducible to a function of (or in) that situation; that every event has its specific occasion does not mean that its significance is exhausted by that occasion. . . . [T]he mere insistence on particularity (on the this-ness of things) cannot resolve any *theoretical* question whatsoever" (39; emphasis in the original).

So, according to Hallward, what is epistemologically productive in historical cognition is neither the singularity-eyed self-invention nor an authenticity-based

essentialism of any specific analytical category, but a “specific relationality” that privileges the relations among different groups:

The specific is always specific-to, in the constrained freedom opened by a distance from (rather than absence of) the object. . . . [E]very speaking *I* is specific to a *you*, without thereby being specified as a particular person with particular attributes. More generally, we are always specific *to* but not specified by our situation, at the apparent limit of that relation whereby the actions of any complex organism are specific to its environment, but not determined by it. (49; emphasis in the original)

Hallward’s caution against theoretical trivialization (i.e. over-contextualization) and against obsession with authenticity (i.e. fetishization of the same conceptual axes for discursive practice such as race, gender, and class) is commendable. His reading in *Absolutely Postcolonial* also provides an acute view of the position of postcolonial theory in relation to other concerns in the humanities. If anything, his ultimate goal is not so much to find fault with postcolonial theory as to propose a more productive way to philosophize politics. Among the critics that he appreciates for their “relational” theory are Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, whose recent project is to reconsider the valence of universality in political thinking (which I will get to in a moment).

A fatal problem with Hallward’s argumentation, however, is that he configures postcolonial theory as exclusively a legacy of Deleuze’s thinking: “it is no coincidence that several of the most distinctive and certainly the most widely read contributions to postcolonial theory are all more or less enthusiastically committed to an explicitly *detritorialising* discourse in something close to the Deleuzian sense—a discourse so fragmented, so hybrid, as to deny its constituent element any sustainable specificity at

all” (22; emphasis in the original). This reading is fallible because, to say the least, identity-politics-driven propositions in effect constitute a significant portion of postcolonial discourse, which, according to Hallward’s system, should belong with the “specified” mode rather than the Deleuzian or “singular” mode.

Another problem with Hallward’s argumentation lies in his singular confidence in the universal valence of the rational subject. It seems that his deliberation on postcolonial theory can make sense only when the most significant contribution of the discipline is airbrushed. That is, what the putative postcolonial stance sets out to dismantle—the “naturalization of colonialism as History,” so to speak (Prakash, “After” 5)—is precisely what Hallward intends to resuscitate. Hallward’s admirable knowledge of debates and theses in postcolonial theory is accompanied by little appreciation of the greatest strength of the theory, that is, the interrogation of the fundamentals of rational modernity. In addition, he has also neglected the fact that some postcolonial discursive practices, rather than invent a narcissistic singular self-image, do pay attention to the interconnections and interdependencies played out in imperial histories and postcolonial moments.

## **II. The Universal vs. the Particular**

In a series of multilateral dialogues with Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek on the use of universalism and “hegemony” in emancipatory politics, materialized into a book published in 2000, Laclau sets out to engage in the following inquires in particular. First of all, amid the burgeoning proliferation of multiculturalism and pluralism, should one assume that multiculturalism embraces nothing but a particularistic logic and rejects anything in the vicinity of universality? Or, is universalism conceivable only as a foundationalism or essentialism and therefore outmoded? Secondly, one predominant feature of the “increasing fragmentation of

contemporary societies” is that pluralized identity politics is espoused by a “discourse of rights” such as rights of the minorities, which assumes a certain kind of universality beyond any contextualization. Is this assertion of universal rights compatible with the assertion of communitarian specificity? Laclau further asks: if the two are incompatible, “is not this incompatibility positive, as it opens the terrain for a variety of negotiations and a plurality of language games which are necessary for the constitution of public spaces in the societies in which we live?” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 7).<sup>2</sup>

Laclau’s stance here, for the most part, is consistent with what he and Chantal Mouffe laid out in their pathbreaking work, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, some fifteen years earlier—that is, to deepen the Gramscian theory of hegemony, a theory that Laclau believes can resolve the tug-of-war between universalism and particularism. Like Hallward, he views relations between groups as relations of power (“each group is not only different from the others but . . . each constitutes such difference on the basis of the exclusion and subordination”). To let each group stick to its particularity, then, will only perpetuate the status quo in terms of the power relationship between groups (“Universalism” 88). To achieve genuine democratic politics (that is, to achieve a radical hegemony), a certain universalism has to be added to the equation. Laclau differs from Hallward, however, in the sense that Laclau does not conceive the universality in question as a

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<sup>2</sup> Laclau’s explication of the proliferation of political identities taps into the “the death of the subject” doxa: “[T]he possibility of the subject/object destination results from the impossibility of constituting either of its two terms. I am a subject precisely because I cannot be an absolute consciousness, because something constitutively alien confronts me. Thus, once objectivism disappeared as an epistemological obstacle, it became possible to develop the full implications of the death of the Subject. At that point, the latter showed the secret poison that inhabited it, the possibility of its second death: the death of the death of the Subject, the reemergence of the subject as a result of its own death; the proliferation of concrete finitudes whose limitations are the source of their strength; the realization that there can be subjects because the gap that the Subject was supposed to bridge is actually unbridgeable” (“Universalism” 83-84).

fullness or a static ideal. For Laclau, universalism should not be regarded as a predestined norm, but as “the symbol of a missing fullness”; not as a principle underlying a particularity, but as “an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity” (89).

His reasoning seems to proceed as follows. First of all, unevenness of power is constitutive of political reality, and hegemonic logic is the best possible way to ensure emancipatory politics. Second of all, the universality-particularity dichotomy will be displaced in a hegemonic relation, for universality can exist only when it is concretized in a certain particularity, while a particularity is political insofar as it attains some universalizing effects. The universal, henceforth, needs to be conceived at all times as a constitutive lack, an object of necessity and impossibility—hence, as “the symbol of a missing fullness.” This entails the third dimension of the hegemonic logic, that is, the universal must maintain the incommensurability between itself and particulars and at the same time allows the latter to assume a representation of itself. If he emphasizes contingency and articulatory relations as the conditions of possibility for hegemony in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau now foregrounds the relations of representation as central to the hegemonic logic. This, however, is not tantamount to saying that his theoretical grounding has shifted drastically. Quite the contrary, the centrality of representation as a necessity, along with the non-normative emptiness that constitutes the locus of representation (“The universal is an empty place, a void which can be filled only by the particular, but which, through its very emptiness, produces a series of crucial effects in the structuration/destructuration of social relations” [“Identity” 58]), only brings into relief the governing claim in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, that is, the contingent nature of hegemony as articulatory or complementary relations between players in the field of social discursivity.



Nevertheless, even though his insistence on the valence of the concept of hegemony has not changed, the idioms Laclau deploys are different—for instance, from “partial fixations [of meanings]” (Laclau and Mouffe 102) to the representational relationship between universals and particulars, and from “the social” as an object of necessity and impossibility” to “the universal” as an object of necessity and impossibility. Moreover, the non-totalitarian hegemony of contingent relations in effect borders on ethics now precisely because of the centrality of universality in the new configuration:

All these demands [for improvements in working conditions, for instance] can be seen as aiming at particular targets which, once achieved, put an end to the movement. But they can be seen in a different way: what the demands aim for is not actually their *concretely* specified targets: these are only the contingent occasion of achieving (in a partial way) something that utterly transcends them: the fullness of society as an impossible object which—through its very impossibility—becomes thoroughly ethical. The ethical dimension is what *persists* in a chain of successive events in so far as the latter are seen as something which is split from their own particularity from the very beginning. Only if I live an action as incarnating an impossible fullness transcending it does the investment become an *ethical* investment; but only if the materiality of the investment is not fully absorbed by that *act* of investment as such—if the distance between the ontic and the ontological, between *investing* (the ethical) and that in which one invests (the normative order) is never filled—can we have hegemony and politics (but, I would argue, also ethics). (“Identity” 84; emphasis in the original)

The ethical moment, for Laclau, names the impossible, full emancipation that radical politics aims for. A genuine democratic community is one where “everything turns around the possibility of keeping always open and ultimately undecided the moment of articulation between the particularity of the normative order and the universality of the ethical moment” (86).

While his ethical turn resembles the ultimate concern in my project, Laclau’s ethics, in the final analysis, has a definite name: democracy. This delimitation also determines his consideration of representation in the hegemonic logic, which, I argue, is the weakest link in Laclau’s otherwise powerful argumentation. First of all, Laclau apparently only focuses on political representativeness or the *vertreten* aspect of representation (which involves the distribution of interests and rights, decision-making, and concretization of common goals) while ignoring the mutual inscription, mutual implication, and mutual displacement between *vertreten* and the other aspect of representation, namely *darstellen* or re-presentation—something Spivak has astutely elaborated in her “Can the Subaltern Speak?” essay.

Furthermore, Laclau shows tremendous confidence in representation because he is convinced that the double movement in the process of representation (from the represented to the representative and, conversely, from the representative to the represented) attests to a process of universalization and, hence, the “fairness” of representation (“Structure” 211-12). This configuration, however, neglects the possibility that the act of representation very often already inscribes the presence of an *a priori* hegemony, a power group that operates and defines the very mechanism of representation—in this case, no contestation among signs seems possible to begin with, even if the arena is wide open. In other words, the openness itself can be a result of manipulation or a preliminary fixation of meanings. Butler has voiced similar doubts:

Why should we conceive of universality as an empty “place” which awaits its content in an anterior and subsequent event? [note: Butler is referring to Laclau’s conception of universality as an “empty but ineradicable place.”] Is it empty only because it has already disavowed or suppressed the content from which it emerges, and where is the trace of the disavowed in the formal structure that emerges? The claim to universality always takes place in a given syntax, through a certain set of cultural conventions in a recognizable venue. Indeed, the claim cannot be made without the claim being recognized as a claim. But what orchestrates what will and will not become recognizable as a claim? (“Restaging” 34-35)

That Butler finds the figurativeness of “empty place” problematic is not a tenuous argument. In fact, Laclau and Mouffe’s earlier theorization of hegemony also stumbles over their choice of metaphor. When elaborating on the incomplete character of “the social,” they contend that it is the irreconcilable gap between interior and exterior that renders impossible the imagination and practice of a fullness of meaning: “There is no single underlying principle fixing—and hence constituting—the whole field of differences. The irresolvable interiority/exteriority tension is the condition of any social practice: necessity only exists as a partial limitation of the field of contingency. It is in this terrain, where neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible, that the social is constituted” (Laclau and Mouffe 111).

The thing is, the interior-exterior distinction is perhaps no longer the most telling metaphor in theorizing the issue in question. Take postcoloniality, for instance. The kinds of temporal, spatial, formal, and ontological tropes that can be evoked in the conceptualization of the overdetermination of the postcolonial (Bhabha’s notion of hybridity being a good example), to be sure, have superseded the idioms of the inside-

outside demarcation and, henceforth, invite a more sophisticated comprehension of our historical cognition.

### **III. Hybridity vs. Diversity**

Bhabha's theoretical paradigm always appears to pivot around the idiom of difference construed as ambivalence. His now popularized terms (hybridity, dissemination, and liminality) are predicated primarily upon a paradoxical move, that is, the doxa of difference is mobilized to such a radical extent that difference eventually has to be conceived as a universal ambivalence and an ambivalent universal as well. Take, for example, his concept of the uncanniness of the migration-metropolis dynamic. The diasporic or immigrant subject's intervention into the narrativity of the metropolis takes place as a creation of an otherness in the metropolis; hence the uncanny feeling:

If the immigrants' desire to "imitate" language produces one void in the articulation of the social space—making present the opacity of language, its untranslatable residue—then the racist fantasy, which disavows the ambivalence of its desire, opens up another void in the present. The migrant's silence elicits those racist fantasies of purity and persecution that must always return from the Outside, to estrange the present of the life of the metropolis; to make it strangely familiar. (166)

At first sight, Bhabha's idiom of ambivalence and mutual implication between cultures points unmistakably towards a configuration of the postcolonial as an overdetermination by an impossibility of difference. A closer look, however, will expose the entrenched uncertainty of positionality on the part of Bhabha, that is, a wavering between "the opposing polarities of cultural differentialism and cultural hybridity" (Ahmad, "Politics" 289). This swaying is puzzling when one recalls that

Bhabha himself has painstakingly made numerous terminological and conceptual distinctions in order to foreground his configuration of the postcolonial overdetermination. These distinctions, as it turns out, only lead his theoretical paradigm back to the same axis of difference that he has tried to depart from. One prominent example lies with his famous distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference. The former, for him, denotes an object of empirical knowledge, a set of recognized cultural contents and norms: “the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations” (34). In other words, cultural diversity is what regular identity politics and politics of difference view as “cultural difference.”

Bhabha’s “cultural difference,” on the other hand, is intended to encompass all the senses of universal ambivalence mentioned above. It is, epistemologically, an otherness that points to the hybridity of all parties involved: “The subject of the discourse of cultural difference is . . . constituted through the locus of the Other which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and, more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection” (162). Yet as a matter of fact, Bhabha’s notion of cultural difference also taps into the same momentum as identity politics: “[C]ultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as ‘knowledgeable,’ authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. . . . [C]ultural difference is a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity” (34; emphasis in the original).

Or, when drawing on Fanon to articulate his point, Bhabha in effect emphasizes the necessity of difference as negation, instead of as his signature notion

of ambivalence, in an ethical colonial encounter (and his collapsing of the colonizer and the colonized here is just superfluous): “What is denied the colonial subject, both as colonizer and colonized, is that form of negation which gives access to the recognition of difference. It is that possibility of difference and circulation which would liberate the signifier of *skin/culture* from the fixations of racial typology, the analytics of blood, ideologies of racial and cultural dominance or degeneration” (75; emphasis in the original). It is therefore questionable whether Bhabha’s valorization of flux, ambiguity, and undecidability, after all, is not meant to serve the idiom of difference, which may or may not border on the “difference” in identity politics.

Furthermore, Bhabha’s scheme also falls short in negotiating two ostensibly different frameworks he promotes: one is undecidability or supplementarity while the other is a clear-cut antagonism—two frameworks that can further translate into polarities such as the performative versus the pedagogical, counter-narrative versus grand narratives. Or, in another troubled moment of straddling two opposing stances, Bhabha “simultaneously acknowledges the legitimacy of the language of political economy and economic exploitation and yet rejects the language of economic determination, class struggle, and historical truth as inadequate, immature, and proto-totalitarian” (Resch 109).

In yet another instance, Bhabha’s appropriation of Walter Benjamin, again, reveals his wavering positionality. On the one hand, Bhabha draws attention to the incommensurability that names the experience with language per se, the foreignness of language in itself that Benjamin has brought into light:

This space of the translation of cultural difference *at the interstices* is infused with that Benjaminian temporality of the present which makes graphic a moment of transition, not merely the continuum of history; it is a strange stillness that defines the present in which the very *writing*

of historical transformation becomes uncannily visible. The migrant culture of the “in-between,” the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture’s untranslatability. (224; emphasis in the original)

Bhabha seems interested in according the migrant figure the same kind of symptomatic status that, say, the *flâneur* represents for Benjamin. What the migrant subject signifies for Bhabha, to be sure, is an in-between being that not only performs but also dramatizes the untranslatability of cultural difference. Yet Bhabha neglects the distinction between “the migrant’s *performing* the untranslatability of cultural difference” and “the migrant’s *dramatizing* the untranslatability of cultural difference”—with the former, he appears to grant an activeness to the migrant subject whereas with the latter, he is attempting to articulate a relatively objective fact for the observer.

The notion of culture’s untranslatability is a translation of Benjamin’s theory of language. For Benjamin, every human language inscribes a foreignness in itself, and the purpose of translation is not so much to reach the signification of the other language as to seek to decipher the foreignness of the translator’s own language. Untranslatability, for Benjamin, reveals more of the inherent otherness in cultural encoding than of the differences between cultures (“Translator”).

When Bhabha stresses the untranslatability in cross-cultural transactions, one risk is that this inter-cultural untranslatability can become an alibi for ignoring the untranslatability inside the “original” culture itself before culture ever starts its crossing enterprise (crossing the ocean, crossing national boundaries, etc.). In other words, the burden of the pedagogical code that is handed down to the subject as “culture” should not be neglected. I argue that what causes anxiety for the postcolonial migrant subject, more often than not, is not really the power imbalance between

his/her original culture and the adopted culture or the ensuing sense of loss, but culture as *the* sign per se or the process of coding culture as a master sign.

When Bhabha suggests matter-of-factly how the migrant *dramatizes* the untranslatability of cultural difference, he has forgotten that, in effect, the postcolonial migrant sometimes does need to *perform* a cultural identity—not to celebrate identity fluidity in a postmodernist fashion, but to diminish the unbearable uncanniness of culture. In the immigrant community in London portrayed in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, each immigrant seeks to mark his/her difference by lodging him/herself into a cultural ideology: for example, pluralism (or, in a more delicious form, “gastronomic pluralism” [246]), assimilation, nativism, and metropolitanism. Yet, at the same time, all these lodgings turn out to be anything but homey.

Put otherwise, Bhabha's deployment of Benjaminian terms bypasses the fact that what is untranslatable is in effect the empty yet loaded warehouse of signs that is called cultural identity (what constitutes the overdetermination of postcoloniality, so to speak). What is un-homey is the need to respond to the call of culture itself—the need to display cultural difference not as a locus of incommensurability, but as “an object of empirical knowledge.” I will address this issue more elaborately in my discussion of Rushdie.

#### **IV. The Ethical vs. the Political**

Spivak's notion of postcoloniality bears a resemblance to Bhabha's concept of ambivalence in the sense that postcoloniality is considered, first and foremost, as an overdetermined inscription. As Bhabha painstakingly foregrounds the ambivalence in postcolonial experience, Spivak views postcoloniality as a manifestation of “the irreducible margin in the center” (“Foundations” 161). This configuration also defines



Spivak's self-positioning in her equating the postcolonial critical positionality with that of deconstruction. That is, postcoloniality is a condition where one inhabits the imperialist heritage and yet cannot but have to critique this heritage. The postcolonial-deconstructionist position, then, is intended to subsume the model of resistance or revolution.

Spivak's theory is also conversant with Laclau's in her acknowledgement of the necessity of universality (*Post-colonial* 11) and her ethical thinking. As Laclau's radical politics (that is, ethics) is inscribed in the impossible, Spivak's ethics also calls attention to the impossibility of naming, presenting, and representing what is inscribed in the aporetic area of difference, usually figured in the subaltern woman. The difference between them is that for Laclau, that impossibility has a definite name (democracy) even though some critics have contended that, for Laclau (and Mouffe), it is impossible to know what democracy precisely is (Chow 46). For Spivak, on the other hand, all naming is catachrestical, yet her (deconstructionist) ethics can proceed alongside nothing other than this catachrestism: "The subaltern is all that is not elite, but the trouble with those kinds of names is that if you have any kind of political interest you name it in the hope that the name will disappear. That's what class consciousness is in the interest of: the class disappearing. What politically we want to see is that the name would not be possible" (*Post-colonial* 158).

Rey Chow has sharply detected Spivak's ethical appeal in the latter's catachrestical perception of history and the constant dilemma that confronts Spivak vis-à-vis the choice between strategic essentialism and anti-essentialism (Chow 39-47). Chow has also pointed out the generalizing tendency in Spivak's thinking—that is, Spivak extends the postcolonial condition ontologically to the point of resembling the condition of all human language. I am, however, baffled by Chow's conclusion that "in spite of [Spivak's] careful articulations of the way language works, when it comes

specifically to naming, Spivak, like Žižek, becomes strangely ‘antiessentialist,’ thus letting poststructuralism’s discursivism, of which both of them are otherwise so astutely critical, gain the upper hand” (Chow 47).

Spivak’s deployment of the catachresis as an exemplar of postcoloniality, in effect, is not tantamount to what Chow describes as naming a centered grounding for subjectivity or mounting an “essentialist” act. If anything, this generalized application of catachresis only brings into relief Spivak’s locating of ethics in the impossible (the impossibility of seeing the name of the subaltern disappear and, at the same time, the impossibility of not hoping so). Moreover, the grounding of Spivak’s contention is an universalization of ontological intervention: “Postcoloniality as agency can make visible that the basis of *all* serious ontological commitment is catachrestical, because negotiable through the information that identity is, *in the larger sense*, a text—a socio-semiotic labyrinth shading off into indefinite margins not fully accessible to the ‘individual’” (“Foundations” 162; emphasis in the original).

Aside from this configuration of postcoloniality as catachresis and hence a universal condition of human language, Spivak’s generalizing schema, as a matter of fact, is already detectable in her naming of the postcolonial critical position as a deconstructionist one. Her understanding of postcoloniality as “the overdetermined play of cultural value in the inscription of the socius” (“Foundations” 165) is another locus where she thinks analogously. Postcoloniality *qua* overdetermination, for instance, instantiates what constitutes contemporary globality (165). Moreover, in a provocative moment, Spivak forcefully argues for the analogy between the postcolonial and the literary, between the postcolonial and the hermeneutic. In addressing the figure of the Rani of Surmir, Spivak, modeled on Paul de Man’s conception of literary history as literary interpretation, repeatedly emphasizes that this figure comes to the historian in a literary mode and is decodable only via a literary

interpretation (*Critique* 245, n73). Above all, Spivak seems to suggest that treating such an elusive figure in a literary fashion is the only ethical way to show the historian's responsibility:

I attend to these figures [subaltern women] because they continue to impose the highest standards on our techniques of retrieval, even as they judge them, not in our rationalist mode. In fact, since they are outside of our efforts, their judgment is not intended. Following a certain statement of Derrida's, perhaps we should rather say: they are the figures of justice as the experience of the impossible. (245-46)

What emerges on the figure of the Rani is interpretation as such; any genealogy of that history can see her as no more than an insubstantial languaged instrument. She is as unverifiable as literature, and yet she is written in, indeed permits the writing of, history as coloniality—so that the postcolonial can come to see his “historical self-location” as a problem. (246, n74)

While Spivak “offers cultural translation as both a theory and practice of political responsibility” (Butler, “Restaging” 36), the conclusion in Spivak's effort of cultural translation often rests with the opacity of the radical Other. Her locating the ethical enterprise in such opacity marks arguably one of the most sensible and lucid deliberations on the problematic of representation in postcolonial theory. There is, however, a twofold risk. One is her overt essentialism, which is not so much “strategic” as unpredictable or fraught with a double standard.<sup>3</sup> The other is the silence

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<sup>3</sup> Spivak has suggested the use of “strategic essentialism” earlier on (*Post-colonial* 45, 108-09). She has also voiced distrust of first-world feminists' comprehension of the third world when, for instance, she critiques the fallacy of her white student's deployment of “irony” in explicating a Tamil peasant woman's doggerel (“Imperialism” 235). The irony is that Spivak herself has also resorted to “irony” for her reading of historical events. For example, when she learned that the descendent of the

afterwards. What comes after the unspeakability, for instance, of the self-immolated *sati*, of the Rani of Sirmur, or of new subaltern women caught in the “globe-girdling struggles” now that the critic has come to realize that “the strongest assertion of agency, to negate the possibility, cannot be an example of itself” (Spivak, *Critique* 276, 292)? I doubt that the answer lies in what Asha Varadharajan suggests, that is, to regain the power of the production of knowledge by valorizing the resistant object following Adorno’s dialectical scheme—a proposal that aims at political purchase as the ultimate goal of critical practices.

My argument is that, one major contribution of postcolonial theory to contemporary cultural critique is nothing other than the radicalization of the problematic of the Other, difference, and representation on a global scale. Therefore, one should take advantage of these insights and extend them in epistemo-ontological as well as ethico-political dimensions of cultural inquiries. That is, if the postcolonial critic has brought into light the limit of knowledge or the danger of “translation-as-violence” (Spivak, “Imperialism” 235), one cannot *not* heed this warning.

In this dissertation, I propose an “other-than-political” project, that is, a thinking at the limit of difference-grounded identity politics within postcolonial contexts. Positing postcoloniality as an inherently political category, to be sure, has been a sanctioned practice in postcolonial theory. It is generally assumed that, as the postcolonial experience involves injustice inflicted upon the erstwhile marginalized or subaltern subjects, contestation for political visibility becomes the primary agenda. Even when critics acknowledge the radical alterity of the subaltern subject or the

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girl who killed herself in Calcutta in 1926 presumably for causes related to national liberation had immigrated to the United States, Spivak told a family member of that girl that their ancestor “hanged herself in vain” (*Critique* 311).

absolute heterogeneity of the postcolonial subject, their ultimate call, more often than not, points to a political project.<sup>4</sup>

Spivak's consistent call for attention to the subaltern subject as the aporia of cultural discourse marks a prominent model of ethical imperative in postcolonial thinking.<sup>5</sup> Her acknowledgement of the absolute singularity of the subaltern resonates with ethical proposals of philosophers such as Levinas, Nancy, and Derrida and departs from the notion of difference in regular identity politics in the sense that such singularity is not necessarily lodged in a definite category—although Spivak also approaches the subaltern from the angle of class and gender politics, her ultimate concern, I argue, points to the radical alterity figured in the subaltern. From the positionality she provides, I would like to push the envelope and engage with issues as to what may come afterwards. With the understanding of each subject's singularity, is it possible and effective to conceive a community? If so, how can such a configuration of community and such a configuration of singularity inform each other productively? In addition, can the conception of the “postcolonial community (of singularities)” advance reconsiderations of the negotiation between ethical imperative and political teleology? If Laclau is right that the current proliferation of identities is born of an epistemological play with “the death of the death of the Subject” doxa or “the proliferation of concrete finitudes whose limitations are the source of their strength” (see note 2 above), can we refuse to be delimited by these concrete finitudes while attending to another finitude such as pre-subjective, pre-identitarian finitude?

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Stephen Slemon, “Scramble” 25-26, 31-32; “Modernism's” 3; Vijay Mishra 42-43; Simon During; Linda Hutcheon, “The Post”; Helen Tiffin.

<sup>5</sup> For other more-or-less ethical proposals in relation to the condition of postcoloniality, see Deepika Bahri 54; and Maureen Moynagh. Or, appeals for “reconciliation” (between, for instance, the current hegemony and the aborigines in Canada and Australia) in recent years can also be considered as an ethical approach to postcoloniality. See, for example, Pal Ahluwalia; Wendy Brown; David Lloyd; and John K. Noyes.

## V. Towards an Ethical Community

In these pages, I will look at Levinas's ethical thinking and Nancy's theory of community to assess their validity for postcolonial theory. The ethical experience in question is not or everyday morality or justice, but an affective responsibility towards alterity prior to the consideration of the self. Its departure point, put simply, is a questioning of the self due to the presence of the other. Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, defines ethics as a "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (43). This self-questioning, moreover, does not lead directly to antagonism or resistance against the other; rather, it suggests a non-totalizing, non-dialectical, and responsible relationship with the other. There is no space to discuss Levinas's ethics in its entirety here, yet I would like to focus on the "cause" that necessitates the sense of responsibility in his ethics, namely, a more sympathetic view of the modern subject as a traumatized subject ("modern subject" is apparently a redundant term since "subjectivity," arguably, is a modern invention so to speak).

This conception of the subject in effect echoes that in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis at several fronts.<sup>6</sup> Lacan's Seminar VII, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, touches upon the subject's experience with *das Ding* ("the Thing") or the "Real." The object-like exteriority that is prehistoric and outside of the realm of signification posits itself as an Other only to be revealed eventually as a reminder of the otherness in the subject itself: "*Das Ding* is that which I will call the outside-of-the-signified. It is as a function of this beyond-of-the-signified and of an emotional relationship to it that the

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<sup>6</sup> Prominent Lacanian critic Žižek, in comparison, usually places emphasis on the equally troubled big Other and aims to find ways for the subject to survive in its recognition of the big Other's incompleteness: "the big Other, the symbolic order itself, it also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other. . . . The lack in the Other gives the subject—so to speak—a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other" (*Sublime* 122).

subject keeps its distance and is constituted in a kind of relationship characterized by primary affect, prior to any repression” (54). Lacan’s brilliance rests in his association of the Thing with desire, especially when the Thing later is incorporated into the notion of *objet petit a* as the primary instigator of desire in the subject. Moreover, while configuring the Thing as being outside of the signified, Lacan at the same time delimits the scope of the Thing as articulatable solely in the word: “the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word [*qu’elle fait mot*], hits the bull’s eyes [*fait mouche*] as they say” (55). Lacan, however, further explains that this *mot* in effect indicates muteness as opposed to that which is spoken. For someone who has stipulated that the structure of the unconscious is tantamount to that of language, Lacan’s association of the Thing with the word bespeaks not so much his ignorance of the linguistically unrepresentable as his awareness of the impossibility of addressing the non-verbal.<sup>7</sup>

While Lacan’s thesis in Seminar VII is illuminating on the ethical dimension of psychoanalysis, the scope of his argumentation seems to be intelligible only in the field of psychoanalysis. Levinas, on the other hand, proposes to put primacy on ethical thinking as the first philosophy. His most important thesis on ethics is predicated upon his configuration of the subject-other relationship:

It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself. This does not mean that my existence is constituted in the thought of the others. An existence called objective, such as is reflected in the thought of the others, and by which I count in universality, in the State, in history, in the totality, does not express me, but precisely dissimulates me. The face I welcome makes me pass from phenomenon to being in another

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<sup>7</sup> See Simon Critchley, *Subjectivity* 198-216, for an acute rendition of Lacan’s ethical move in comparison with Levinas’s ethics, including the stakes of Lacan’s privileging of tragedy as the mechanism of sublimation in the face of the absolute Other.

sense: in discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response—acuteness of the present—engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality. This extreme attention does not actualize what was in potency, for it is not conceivable without the other. Being attentive signifies a surplus of consciousness, and presupposes the call of the other. (*Totality* 178)<sup>8</sup>

The face [*visage*] becomes one of the two major interrelated image-concepts (the other being language) employed by Levinas to elaborate his ethics in the early to middle stages of his career. Derived from the architectural notion of façade, the face figures as the exposure of the thing which discloses its secret in its myth. Not a negation of me nor a violence imposed upon me, the face of the exposed other founds and justifies me in the sense of calling me to take up responsibility, calling me to respond to the revelation of this otherness *qua* the unknown (192-97).

On the other hand, it is by way of language that the ethical experience is rendered exigent. Language, for Levinas, presupposes the commerce between interlocutors and, henceforth, presupposes a plurality. Furthermore, the kind of relationship inscribed in the transaction of language implies “transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me” (73). Levinas even names the relationship in language *the* experience (“the experience of something absolutely foreign, a *pure* ‘knowledge’ or ‘experience,’ a *traumatism of astonishment*”) as opposed to ordinary experience insofar as the latter refers to “experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist” (193; emphasis in the original). Eventually, in effect, language becomes the materialization of the visual image of the face and articulates the revelation of the face upon the self.

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<sup>8</sup> Levinas sometimes uses small-lettered “the other” and at other times “the Other”; at one point he explicates the Other to be “the absolutely other” (*Totality* 197).



In his later works, Levinas further concretizes the ethical subject as a subject in hostage, a subject of pity, compassion, pardon, and religiosity. Levinas emphasizes that this kind of religious attentiveness to the other takes place prior to the ego and consciousness: “The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles” (*Otherwise* 117). In a move of substitution or transference, the subject of hostage is to put itself in the place of the other, to move from the principle of “by the other” to that of “for the other.” In other words, the Levinasian ethical subject eventually turns into an other in opposition to the ego which exerts auto-affection all the time (113-18). Levinas at one point even terms this experience as *traumatisme assourdissant* (“deafening trauma”) (111), which critic Simon Critchley astutely associates with the phrase “la rue assourdissante” in Baudelaire’s “A une passante,” a poem delineating the new and nearly traumatic experience of encountering crowds in nineteenth-century Paris (Critchley, *Subjectivity* 190).<sup>9</sup>

Levinasian ethics, like psychoanalysis, foregrounds dimensions of the subject that the subject itself cannot access. On the other hand, both Levinas and Lacan insist on the primacy of language in the configuration of the subject’s ethical experience. But instead of confining *a priori* their analytic of the ethical to the linguistically representable, they focus on language with a particular understanding of language vis-à-vis human experience—that is, language names the human attempt at cognizing and representing experience insofar as language also lays bare materially the impossibility of a full representation. My configuration of ethics in the postcolonial condition is primarily pivoted on such a constitutive limitation of language—the limitation of language in the constitution of human experience. In my discussion of Taiwan literature in Chapter Five, this question shall linger around to invite further

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<sup>9</sup> Critchley basically suggests that this traumatic experience constitutive of the Levinasian subject echoes psychoanalytical configuration of the subject even though Levinas himself lacks particular enthusiasm for psychoanalysis (*Subjectivity* 183-97).

considerations: questions regarding the stakes of including or excluding preverbal or nonverbal experience in understanding ethics, especially in one's encounter with the trope of death.

Levinas painstakingly warns of rejoining the ontological tradition as the latter, for him, is predicated upon the reduction of the absolute other to the self or to what he calls the Same. Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophy of community, on the other hand, seeks to resuscitate ontology by grounding ethical thinking in a "relational ontology." To be more specific, Heidegger's *Mitsein* is furthered by Nancy into a consideration of Being, first and foremost, as a "being-with," namely a relationship with fellow beings: "Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence" (*Being* 3; emphasis in the original).

While dozens of philosophers have attempted to thematize the self's relationship with society or the community, few of them have foregrounded the "with" as the very essence of Being or as the source of ethics—even Heidegger falls short in this respect as he sees the "with" as secondary in the originary character of *Dasein* (Nancy, *Being* 30-31, 34-35; *Inoperative* 9-12). For Nancy, the "being-with" or "being-in-common" dimension has an originary status in ontological thinking—that is, the dimension of "in-common" is not as much an addition to the dimension of "being-self" as being co-originary and coextensive with the latter (*Inoperative* xxxvii). Seemingly less shocking or traumatic as Levinas's and psychoanalytical conceptions of subjectivity, Nancy's relational ontology (or "social ontology" as Critchley calls it [*Subjectivity* 240]) locates the singularity of being in nothing other than plurality. His invention *Être singulier pluriel* ("Being singular plural") configures the mutual generativeness between meaning and being, between singularity and commonality:

Being singular plural: in a single stroke, without punctuation, without a mark of equivalence, implication, or sequence. A single, continuous-

discontinuous mark tracing out the entirety of the ontological domain, being-with-itself designated as the “with” of Being, of the singular and plural, and dealing a blow to ontology—not only another signification but also another syntax. . . . Because none of these three terms precedes or grounds the other, each designates the coessence of the others.

(*Being* 37)

Nancy sees the relationship between these terms as both a coexistence and a division insofar as the division constitutes the coexistence and vice versa. Just as his use of *partager* suggests—the French word denoting both “to share” and to “divide”—the “being-with” of Being puts primacy on plurality precisely because of the absolute singularity of each being. Instead of canceling off or contradicting with each other, sharing and dividing—being-in-common and being-separated—in effect illuminate each other.

Writing in the wake of the defeat of the left, Nancy seeks a consideration of the political not in light of social contract, communion, or Marxist communism, but, rather, in light of pre-subjective ontology. One radical statement of his declares that “‘left’ means, *at the very least*, that the political, as such, is receptive to what is at stake in community” (*Inoperative* xxxvi; emphasis in the original). The traditional conception of subject, according to him, prescribes a relation of representation, and representation inevitably prescribes a power relation. In contrast, his configuration of the political, namely his notion of community, is inscribed in an understanding of finitude *qua* singularity grounded in plurality: “The singular is an *ego* that is not a ‘subject’ in the sense of the relation of a self to itself. It is an ‘ipseity’ that is not the relation of a ‘me’ to ‘itself.’ It is neither ‘me’ nor ‘you’; it is what is distinguished in the distinction, what is discreet in the discretion” (*Being* 32; emphasis in the original). One major task of Nancy’s is to posit a non-dialectical thinking in a similar fashion as

Blanchot's thinking. For the latter, a dialectical relation indicates a manipulation of the other in the interest of the self, including turning the other into the big Other:

In a dialectical relation, the I-subject, either dividing itself or dividing the Other, affirms the *Other* as an intermediary and realizes itself in it (in such a way that the I is able to reduce the Other to the truth of the Subject). In this . . . relation the absolutely Other and Self immediately unite: this relation is one of coincidence and participation, sometimes obtained through methods of immediation. The Self and the Other lose themselves in one another: there is ecstasy, fusion, fruition. But here the "I" ceases to be sovereign; sovereignty is in the Other who is the sole absolute. (*Infinite* 66; emphasis in the original)

For Nancy, who rarely thematizes the big Other, a community of finitude manifests itself in the mutual exposure of beings in the community—that is, the coexistence of fellow beings only brings into light for the self the exteriority of its own being: "The being-communicating (and not the subject-representing), or if one wants to risk saying it, communication as the predicament of being, as 'transcendental,' is above all *being-outside-itself*" (*Inoperative* 24; emphasis in the original). Extending the meaning of the word *comparution* ("appearance") into *com-parution* ("co-appearing" or "appearing-with"), Nancy stresses the aspect of the co-existence in being-in-the-world insofar as the latter also inscribes a mutual exposure.

It is, however, not an exposure to a common substance or essence. Nancy meticulously stipulates that singularity is not an identity and that exposure takes place prior to any identification ("Being-in-Common" 7). To be in a community, then, is to be exposed to others who are exposed as well, that is, exposed to the otherness that constitutes Being: "Community is the community of *others*, which does not mean that several individuals possess some common nature in spite of their differences, but

rather that they partake only of their otherness. . . . They are together, but togetherness is otherness” (*Birth* 155; emphasis in the original).

Nancy’s attempt to break out of the limit of regular subject-object dialectics is also articulated in his conception of simultaneity. Instead of positing the subject as the center of cognition, affection, reason, and politics, Nancy presents a being of being with others simultaneously in a certain “here and now” in history. I will address this kind of ethics born of simultaneity in my discussions of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and *Dancing Crane*.

Critics like Critchley are concerned that no politics is possible without identification or figuration: “what is lacking [in Nancy’s thinking] is a means of *identification* (in the Freudian sense) for being-with, given that previous forms of identification for the political reconstitution of the social have become degraded: people, nation, race, party, leader, proletariat or whatever. . . . The vast question here is whether being-with can do without some figure, without some form of identification, without some form of what Nancy would call ‘civil religion’” (*Subjectivity* 242; emphasis in the original).<sup>10</sup> This, I claim, is precisely the kind of proposition in which Nancy’s philosophy intends to intervene. It is precisely because previous tropes of identification have fallen short, reservations arise on the efficacy of new identity politics proposed by, say, minority discourse and identity-politics-informed postcolonialism. In the Blanchot passage cited above, Blanchot acutely delineates a possible scenario in identity politics, that is, the situation wherein the erstwhile other-ed being now emerges as sovereignty. In the logic of dialectics, however, this Other will soon turn into a big Self that manipulates others and repeats the same itinerary of negation and synthesis: “The Self and the Other lose themselves in one another: there

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<sup>10</sup> Also see Todd May 21-75, who criticizes Nancy for not accepting any common sense of commonality. May proposes to conceive of community as practice or as “contingent holism” (75).

is ecstasy, fusion, fruition. But here the ‘I’ ceases to be sovereign; sovereignty is in the Other who is the sole absolute” (*Infinite* 66).

My argument is that Nancy’s notion of community, along with Levinas’s ethics, offers an important “reality check” for current identity politics in the sense that their thoughts point to an area that identity politics does not tread onto due to its unrepresentability. Nancy and Levinas bring into relief the stakes of avoiding the unrepresentable; their ethics, in my understanding, pivots upon nothing other than the consideration of the unrepresentable.

In the textual analysis that follows, I will first visit the high time of modernity and examine the exigency of the question of difference manifest in the work of Charles Baudelaire. Then, through Salman Rushdie’s writing, I will address the “ontological” aspect of postcoloniality by looking at postcoloniality’s overdetermined condition. From there, I will start exploring the possibility of considering postcolonial issues in tandem with ethical thinking through the work of Theresa Cha and Dancing Crane.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Vierges en Fleurs:*

#### The Ethics of Writing Sameness in Charles Baudelaire

*The uncommon difficulty in approaching the core of  
Baudelaire's poetry is, to speak in a formula, this: there is  
about this poetry still nothing out of date.*

*--Walter Benjamin, "Central Park"*

My textual analysis begins with a study of the shaky grounding of the vocabulary of difference at the forefront of high modernity. In this chapter, I propose that at a time when the configuration of "difference" is assuming functional importance in epistemological, cultural, and political formations in European modernity, Baudelaire the ordained arch-modernist is already undermining the primacy of difference. I will examine how, in his Lesbian Poems, the male poetic persona seeks a non-desiring and non-narcissistic approach to the other, which I will read as an ethical approach.

During the period 1845-1847, a decade before the publication of his first collection of poetry, Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) on various occasions announced that this collection would be entitled *Les Lesbiennes*.<sup>1</sup> When the first edition of the collection finally came out in 1857, with the title of *Les Fleurs du mal* instead of *Les Lesbiennes*, only three poems explicitly dealt with the lesbian subject, all placed in the section bearing the same title as the collection. For a poet whose poetic persona easily

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<sup>1</sup> See editor/annotator Claude Pichois's notes in the Gallimard (Pléiade) edition of Baudelaire's *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1: 792-94. All page references to Baudelaire and Pichois are to this two-volume edition, hereafter abbreviated as *OC*.

comes across as misogynous, sado-masochistic, and manipulative towards heterosexual female objects<sup>2</sup>, what is the role played by his one-time fascination with the lesbian figure in his “modern” writings? For a poet whose view of modernity finds its best articulation in the heterosexual female, what are the ethico-political implications of writing female homosexuality into a historical mode that has yet to find the right medium to address homoeroticism? Baudelaire was among the pioneers who first approached the lesbian theme in nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>3</sup> Do the Lesbian Poems say anything about the arch-modernist’s poetic vision—and, perhaps, the failure of his vision as well?<sup>4</sup> Or, are the three poems merely an accidental detour that Baudelaire later would forego?

Walter Benjamin was among the first to suggest examining the ethico-political dimensions of modernity via Baudelaire’s transgressive female figures: “The motif of the androgyne, the lesbian or the barren woman is to be dealt with in relation to the destructive violence of the allegorical intention” (“Central Park” 35). Benjamin would historicize these transgressive women and place them within the emergent capitalist world of commodification and mass production:

The nineteenth century began openly and without reserve to include the woman in the process of commodity production. The theoreticians were united in their opinion that her specific femininity was thereby

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<sup>2</sup> Some famous readings conducted along these lines include those by Leo Bersani, Richard Burton, Barbara Johnson, and Peggy Kamuf. Bersani suggests that Baudelaire’s misogyny is nothing but the poet’s attempt to repress his feminine side and to keep his identity from being reduced to fragments. Johnson argues that Baudelaire manipulates the male privilege of “playing feminine” and replaces sexual difference with a male self-difference. Burton and Kamuf also argue in a similar vein. Burton contends that there is a repressed femininity inside the male poet, and that the Baudelairean woman often represents poetic creativity, a force that man has to tame in order to take advantage of it. Kamuf suggests that the invoking and silencing of the female voice are integral part of the poet’s artistic creation. Also see Lowe.

<sup>3</sup> See Claude Pichois, *OC* 1: 1127-28; Joan DeJean; Lillian Faderman; and Thaïs Morgan.

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to those poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* that address the poetic persona’s (heterosexual) mistress as Mistress Poems, and those poems that can be read as addressing the prostitute figure as Prostitute Poems.



endangered; masculine traits must necessarily manifest themselves in women after a while. Baudelaire affirms these traits. At the same time, however, he seeks to free them from the domination of the economy. Hence the purely sexual accent which he comes to give this developmental tendency in woman. The paradigm of the lesbian woman bespeaks the ambivalent position of “modernity” vis-à-vis technological development. (*Arcades* 318; also “Central Park” 39)

Prostitution opens up the possibility of a mythical communion with the masses. The rise of the masses is, however, simultaneous with that of mass-production. Prostitution at the same time appears to contain the possibility of surviving in a world (*Lebensraum*) in which the objects of our most intimate use have increasingly become mass-produced. (“Central Park” 40)

This twofold approach—on the one hand, an eschatological reading of transgressive women as signifying the violence of history that would denaturalize the organic; on the other hand, a sociological anatomy of modernity’s maneuvering of sexuality and gender ramifications—renders Benjamin’s analytic framework insightful and complex, if not also confusing.<sup>5</sup> It seems that, at the sociological level, Benjamin

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<sup>5</sup> One possible cause for confusion is the inclusive scope of Benjamin’s notion of allegory. Critics have attempted to distinguish Benjamin’s allegory from his other philosophemes. Susan Buck-Morss, for instance, differentiates allegory (historical nature: ruin) from symbol (mythic nature: wish image), phantasmagoria (mythic history: fetish), and trace (natural history: fossil) (210-12), yet Benjamin’s allegory very often is interchangeable with his other philosophemes and, once in a while, even emerges as the central signifier for modernity. It is debatable as to whether Benjamin’s theoretical paradigm is indeed fixed, as Buck-Morss puts it, “within an unreconciled and transitory field of oppositions” (210). For example, while he presents allegory as an “antidote to myth” (“Central Park” 46), Benjamin elsewhere also mentions the “refunctioning of allegory in the commodity economy”—by which he means the re-creation of aura for the commodity, the “deceptive transfiguration of the world of the commodity” (42). Thus, allegory here appears to resemble the fetishization of the commodity or “phantasmagoria” in Buck-Morss’s categorization. Or, Benjamin would present the dialectical image as “an image flashing up in the *now* of recognisability, that the past, in this case that of Baudelaire, can be

means to distinguish the relationships of the prostitute and the lesbian vis-à-vis modernity: prostitution bespeaks the reification of women while the lesbian figure assumes a heroic positioning against the “naturalizing” agenda of modernity. At the eschatological level, however, this distinction is not meticulously pursued, and the prostitute and the lesbian tend to be considered within the same idiom.

Following Benjamin’s model, major critic Christine Buci-Glucksmann situates Baudelaire within the “feminization of culture” that transpired in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. She argues that in a crisis period such as modernity, the “woman question” emerges as a sign for the “question of civilization” that has to be tackled via “a whole series of oppositions and myths.” Gender identity, then, represents one of these “oppositions and myths.” More importantly, the feminine would become “an element in the break with a certain discredited rationality based upon the idea of a historical and symbolic continuum”; the feminine would come to signify a new heterogeneity, a new otherness in modernity (49).

Buci-Glucksmann’s critique usefully elaborates Benjamin’s gendered reading of modernity. Yet, both she and Benjamin focus primarily on the ethico-political significance of Baudelaire’s lesbian figure at the expense of the real texture/textuality of the three Lesbian Poems. Moreover, they both see the Baudelairean prostitute and lesbian figures through the same optics. The problem with this approach rests in their allegorical reading of Baudelaire’s lesbian figure. For, as a matter of fact, the lesbian in Baudelaire’s Lesbian Poems—a mythological figure, perhaps—is barely an allegorical figure in the conventional sense, that is, a personification. Nor does she fit

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captured” (“Central Park” 49)—an image not so different from the allegorical, which Benjamin renders as “the opposition between antiquity and the modern to be transposed out of the pragmatic context” (35). Yet, at some point, Benjamin also stipulates that the “correspondence between antiquity and the modern” to be found in Baudelaire—that is, “the allegorical way of seeing”—excludes dialectics rather than contains it (47).

into the Benjaminian notion of “modern allegory.”<sup>6</sup> It is rather the mistress and the prostitute in *Les Fleurs du mal* who have occasionally emerged as allegorical personifications. It is also the mistress and the prostitute who best illustrate Benjamin’s modern allegory.

Outside the Benjaminian tradition, other Baudelairean critics who have dealt with the lesbian subject either dismiss this thematic as the poet’s intent to shock society<sup>7</sup>, or contend from the perspective of gender studies that femininity (including homosexual femininity) in and for Baudelaire represents a creativity and otherness that the poet figure eventually must subsume to maintain his creative male subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> While the latter approach in general has produced sophisticated readings of Baudelaire’s Mistress Poems,<sup>9</sup> I will argue that it is insufficient to read the Lesbian Poems solely in the light of gender issues. Nor is it enough to view the Lesbian Poems through the same lens that we view other poem clusters, or to deal with the lesbian figure merely in relation to the biographical Baudelaire in the context of an emerging modernity.<sup>10</sup> I will claim that the Lesbian Poems in effect occupy a very distinctive position in Baudelaire’s poetic mission. In terms of semantics, stylistics, and thematics, the Lesbian Poems stand out on their own; the use of metaphors and the imagery/imaginary of the female figure in these poems signify a different sense of temporality and a different subject-object relationship than what we find, for instance, in the Mistress and Prostitute clusters.

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<sup>6</sup> What needs to be emphasized is that Benjamin’s notion of modern allegory, which is largely born of his reading of Baudelaire, is to be distinguished from his notion of baroque allegory, which he elaborates in the monograph *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Lillian Faderman 254-71.

<sup>8</sup> For the “male lesbianism” in Baudelaire, see Michel Butor (ch. 6) and Thaïs Morgan. For Baudelaire as a disturbed homosexual playing out masochistic neuroses in his poetry, see Nicholas Kostis. I will return to these critics later.

<sup>9</sup> See note 2.

<sup>10</sup> For the latter, see Walter Benjamin, “Central Park”; Christine Buci-Glucksmann; and Dominique Fisher.

In what follows, I will launch a close textual analysis of the Lesbian Poems and address not only the poetics but also, based on the understanding of these poetics, the ontological and epistemological dimensions of these poems. The ultimate goal is to achieve a better grip on the ethico-political exigency of a (heterosexual) male writer's writing of female homosexuality, the exigency of writing sameness in (sexual) difference. In my analysis, I will use the capitalized "Poet" to denote the male poetic persona in Baudelaire's poetry—a persona that straddles the floating space interconnecting the real-life poet Baudelaire, the ideal writing subject that Baudelaire aims to project into his verses, and the actual/textual subject whose presence constantly reveals his discrepancies from the ideal and eventually disturbs the entire poetic enterprise that Baudelaire seems to have in mind.

### **I. The Mistress and the Prostitute: The Wrong Muses**

Baudelaire's artistic ideal is marked by an obsession with the orders of time. As one of his art critiques, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," suggests: "toute notre originalité vient de l'estampille que le *temps* imprime à nos sensations" (*OC* 2: 696; emphasis in the original).<sup>11</sup> His conception of beauty repeatedly stresses the co-existence of eternity with transitoriness:

Toutes les beautés contiennent, comme tous les phénomènes possibles, quelque chose d'éternel et quelque chose de transitoire, —d'absolu et de particulier. La beauté absolue et éternelle n'existe pas, ou plutôt elle n'est qu'une abstraction écrémée à la surface générale des beautés diverses. L'élément particulier de chaque beauté vient des passions, et

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<sup>11</sup> "All our originality comes from the stamp that *time* imprints on our sensations." All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. For aesthetic reasons, most quotations will be placed in the footnotes.

comme nous avons nos passions particulières, nous avons notre beauté.

(“Salon de 1846,” *OC* 2: 493)<sup>12</sup>

Most Mistress Poems indicate that the Poet is constantly wrestling with mortal time—which is tantamount not so much to human mortality as to the “immortal” life of *ennui*. In “Le Masque,” for example, the woman who symbolizes divine beauty is condemned in that she shares the same fate with ordinary creatures: “Elle pleure, insensé, parce qu’elle a vécu! / Et parce qu’elle vit! Mais ce qu’elle déplore / Surtout, ce qui la fait frémir jusqu’aux genoux, / C’est que demain, hélas! il faudra vivre encore! / Demain, après-demain et toujours! —comme nous!” (*OC* 1: 24).<sup>13</sup> Here, daily existence turns into the curse of eternal return. This sentiment also predominates in all four poems entitled “Spleen,” where immortality is received with mixed feelings because it is (mis)recognized as *ennui*: “L’ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité, / Prend les proportions de l’immortalité” (*OC* 1: 73).<sup>14</sup> Yet various Mistress Poems suggest that the Poet shuns mortality as well. In “Une Charogne,” for instance, the sight of a dead animal conjures up the loathsome thought that his mistress, too, will soon fall prey to mortality (*OC* 1: 31-32).

The Poet does long for eternity. Yet, instead of the pseudo-immortality or eternal curse of *ennui*, he seeks the kind of eternity that will not only facilitate but also commemorate the creation of his poetry. In his bitter moments (moments of Spleen, so to speak), the Poet’s agony is mostly generated by the mistress’s oblivious nature:

“L’oubli puissant habite sur ta bouche, / Et le Léthé coule dans tes baisers” (“Le

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<sup>12</sup> “All kinds of beauty, just like all possible things, contain some eternal aspect and some transitory aspect—some absolute element and some particular element. Absolute and eternal beauty does not exist; or, rather, it is nothing but an abstraction skimmed off the general surface of diverse beautiful things. The particular element of each kind of beauty comes from passion. And just as each of us has our particular passion, each of us has our own sense of beauty.”

<sup>13</sup> “She cries, madly, because she has lived, and because she lives! Yet what she deplores most and what makes her tremble all the way to her knees is the fact that tomorrow, alas, she has to live again—tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and forever—just like us!”

<sup>14</sup> “*Ennui*, result of gloomy indifference, takes on the proportion of immortality.”

Léthé,” *OC* 1: 156);<sup>15</sup> “Désormais tu n’es plus, ô matière vivant! / Qu’un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante, / . . . / Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux, / Oublié sur la carte . . .” (“Spleen,” *OC* 1: 73).<sup>16</sup> In his moments of *Idéal*, on the other hand, the Poet finds inspiration in his mistress’s eternalizing memory: “Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!” (“Harmonie du Soir,” *OC* 1: 47);<sup>17</sup> “chère Déesse, Être lucide et pur, / Sur les débris fumeux des stupides orgies / Ton souvenir plus clair, plus rose, plus charmant, / À mes yeux agrandis voltige incessamment. / . . . / Ainsi . . . ton fantôme est pareil, / Âme resplendissante, à l’immortel soleil!” (“L’Aube spirituelle,” *OC* 1: 46).<sup>18</sup> At times, however, it is the Poet’s art rather than the mistress’s memory that can surpass mortal time: “Alors, ô ma beauté! dites à la vermine / Qui vous mangera de baisers, / Que j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine / De mes amours decomposes” (“Une Charogne,” *OC* 1: 32).<sup>19</sup>

It seems that infinity or immortality is desirable only when poetic creation is involved. Yet, the Poet seems constantly anxious over the genuine source of his creativity. On the one hand, infinity is something he has yet to be introduced to, as he confesses in “Hymne à la Beauté”: “Si ton œil, ton souris, ton pied, m’ouvrent la porte / D’un Infini que j’aime et n’ai jamais connu?” (*OC* 1: 25).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, infinity seems already inherent in his poetry (“j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine”). Such an uncertainty can explain why he is often misled by the kind of beauty his mistress represents and why he is often left devastated afterwards. For behind the

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<sup>15</sup> “Powerful oblivion lives on your lips, and the Lethe flows in your kisses.”

<sup>16</sup> “O living matter, from now on you are nothing but a rock encompassed by a vague fear, . . . an old Sphinx unknown to the insouciant world, left off the map . . .”

<sup>17</sup> “Your memory shines on me like a monstrosity.”

<sup>18</sup> “Dear Goddess, so bright and pure: on the smoked debris of stupid orgies, your memory—clearer, rosier, and more charming—hovers incessantly before my wide eyes. . . . Glorious spirit, your shade is equal to the immortal sun!”

<sup>19</sup> “O my Beauty! Tell the vermin that will devour you by its kisses that I have kept intact the divine form and essence of my rotten loves.”

<sup>20</sup> “What if your eyes, your smiles, and your feet open for me the door of Infinity, which I love and yet have never known?”

mistress's superficial beauty is nothing but a void that cannot promise any difference—that is, a void that cannot make today different from yesterday, tomorrow different from today. It is noteworthy that, even though Baudelaire constantly reiterates his dichotomous aesthetics in his prose pieces (that is, as shown in the quotes above, beauty and art are both constituted by the eternal and the transitory), the poetic rendition of the “transitory” part of beauty/art very often emerges as a distressing, sometimes destructive, experience for the Poet.

This motif of the misplaced ideal of beauty is tellingly unfolded in the allegorical mode. Two poems in the Mistress cluster explicitly address Beauty as a personification of fatal attraction:

Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l'abîme,  
 Ô Beauté? ton regard, infernal et divin,  
 Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime,  
 Et l'on peut pour cela te comparer au vin. (“Hymne à la Beauté,” *OC* 1:  
 24)<sup>21</sup>

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,  
 Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,  
 Consumeront leurs jours en d'austères études;

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,  
 De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:  
 Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles! (“Beauté,” *OC* 1:  
 21)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “O Beauty! Do you come from the deep sky or are you from the abyss? Your regard, both infernal and divine, pours out a mixture of beneficence and crime, and that is why we can compare you to wine.”

I will come back to this image of mirrors and compare it with the mirror image in the Lesbian Poems in light of the Poet's (mis-)identification with his female objects. Allegory in the Mistress Poems, illustrated in these two poems above, translates the Poet's desperation for poetic inspiration, which is wrongly identified with his heterosexual lover. This sentiment is pointedly replayed, with an even more diabolical twist, in the Prostitute Poems. "Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs" presents Debauchery and Death as twin sisters who scoff at the modern mystification of marriage and fertility; "Allégorie" portrays a transgressive woman's defiance of Debauchery and Death while at the same time it also betrays her affinity with them. "La Béatrice" and "Les Métamorphoses du Vampire," both addressing the Poet's disillusionment with his false muse, do not feature any allegorical figure at first sight. Yet, as another poem in the same cluster, "Un Voyage à Cythère," well puts it, the Poet's perception of life has already been shaped by the allegorical lens: "Le ciel était charmant, la mer était unie; / Pour moi tout était noir et sanglant désormais, / Hélas! et j'avais, comme en un suaire épais, / *Le cœur enseveli dans cette allégorie*" (OC 1: 119; emphasis mine).<sup>23</sup>

It seems that Benjamin's various senses of modern allegory developed out of Baudelaire's poetry may converge here. First, there is the "allegorical intention" as the "destruction of the organic and living—the extinguishing of appearance" ("Central Park" 41). Secondly, there is the deadly image of allegory in the female: "Women in Baudelaire: the most precious spoils in the 'Triumph of Allegory'—Life, which means Death. This quality is most unqualifiedly characterised by the whore" (39). Then, there is the association of allegory with the sentiment of melancholy when the latter

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<sup>22</sup> "Poets, when facing my grand postures that I seem to borrow from the proudest monuments, spend their days in austere studies. For I, in order to fascinate these docile lovers, have these pure mirrors that can make everything prettier—my eyes, my big eyes with eternal clarity!"

<sup>23</sup> "The sky was charming, and the sea was peaceful. Yet for me everything was dark and bloody since then. Alas! *I had*, as if in a thick shroud, *buried my heart in this allegory*."



indicates a dwelling on nothing other than fragments (36, 41, 51). Finally, there is the optical aspect of allegory—that is, allegory as a way of seeing (52).

A look at a much discussed poem, “Le Cygne” from the “Tableaux Parisiens” section, further drives home the point that the allegorical nature (in the Benjaminian sense) of *Les Fleurs du mal* is centered around the incongruous sense of temporality *qua* modernity: “Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie / N’a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs, / Vieux faubourgs, *tout pour moi devient allégorie*, / Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs” (*OC* 1: 86; emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> This sentiment would find its film-noir version in the vampirical prostitute figure: “Tremblaient confusément des débris de squelette, / Qui d’eux-mêmes rendaient le cri d’une girouette / Ou d’une enseigne, au bout d’une tringle de fer, / Que balance le vent pendant les nuits d’hiver” (“Les Métamorphoses du Vampire,” *OC* 1: 159).<sup>25</sup> The creaky metallic sounds issuing from the remains of the vampirical woman allegorize the anachronism of modern life.

Baudelaire once commented that modernity constitutes one half of art, whose other half is eternity: “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” (“Peintre,” *OC* 2: 695).<sup>26</sup> If his allegorical figures in the Mistress and Prostitute clusters illustrate the ephemeral and fugitive half of art *qua* modernity, where, then, does he locate the eternalizing aspect of art if it does exist in his poetic vision? Even though the multi-layered allegory in the Benjaminian model is meant to apply to both the prostitute and the lesbian, I would argue that, in effect, the use of allegory in *Les Fleurs du mal*

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<sup>24</sup> “Paris changes, but nothing in my melancholy has moved. New palaces, scaffoldings, blocks, and the old suburbs—all of them become allegories to me, while my dear memories are heavier than rocks.”

<sup>25</sup> “The ruins of a skeleton were trembling by themselves like a creaking weather vane, or like a [commercial] sign hung at the end of an iron pole swinging in the wind on winter nights.”

<sup>26</sup> “Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent—one half of art, whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”

marks the very difference between the lesbian and other female figures in Baudelaire. Both conventional allegory and Benjaminian modern allegory are nowhere to be found in the three Lesbian Poems. As a matter of fact, even though I have tried to separate the two types of allegories for the sake of clarity, it should be noted that, in Baudelaire, Benjaminian modern allegory, with its use of terms like Debauchery and Death, is decodable insofar as it happens to inhabit a conventional personification.

## II. Flowering Virgins

Of the three immediately identifiable Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, two were banned from publication after the appearance of the 1857 edition: “Lesbos” and “Femmes damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte” (the latter will be cited as “Delphine et Hippolyte” hereafter). Only the third poem, also entitled “Femmes damnées,” survived juridical scrutiny. These poems are generally dated to the earlier stages of the poet’s career.<sup>27</sup>

The condemned women in these poems do not appear in the conventional allegorical mode of personification. “Lesbos” portrays the mythical figure Sappho as the mother of the isle of lesbians, Lesbos. Yet Sappho only exists as an absence that both Lesbos and the narrative about Lesbos (namely, this poem) seek to invoke in order to generate their respective possibilities. Nor do Delphine, Hippolyte, or those nameless lesbian women in “Femmes damnées” come across as allegorical figures. If anything, these poems project an intricate temporality: a seeming timelessness interrupted by the present—the Poet’s present.

“Lesbos” is narrated mostly in the present tense. As each stanza begins and ends with the same verse, refrains lend an air of always-the-same-ness—a feeling that

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<sup>27</sup> An earlier version of “Lesbos” was published in an anthology of poetry published by Garnier entitled *Les Poètes de l’amour* in 1850. See Claude Pichois, *OC* 1: 1060-61, 1123-24, 1126-27; also F. W. Leakey 30-31.

is reinforced by the fact that the real addressee of the narrative is the immobile isle Lesbos instead of any specific figure that comes and goes. Yet this timelessness is disturbed at least twice: the first time is when the Poet recalls how he has started a liaison with Lesbos, and the second time when Sappho's death is mentioned. At first sight, it is Sappho's death that marks the history of the isle, that divides the time of Lesbos into a before and an after: "Et c'est depuis ce temps que Lesbos se lamente!" (*OC* 1: 152).<sup>28</sup> Yet, as I will argue, it is in effect the Poet's intrusion into the middle of the narration that makes history for Sappho and Lesbos possible—and this is so all because of the Poet's act of writing. Stanzas nine and ten of "Lesbos" read:

Car Lesbos entre tous m'a choisi sur la terre  
 Pour chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs,  
 Et je fus dès l'enfance admis au noir mystère  
 Des rires effrénés mêlés aux sombres pleurs;  
 Car Lesbos entre tous m'a choisi sur la terre.

Et depuis lors je veille au sommet de Leucate,  
 Comme une sentinelle à l'œil perçant et sûr,  
 Qui guette nuit et jour brick, tartane ou frégate,  
 Dont les formes au loin frissonnent dans l'azur;  
 Et depuis lors je veille au sommet de Leucate (*OC* 1: 151)<sup>29</sup>

The conjunction *car* ("for") in stanza nine demands attention. Right before this stanza, the Poet was celebrating the "religion" of these "vierges au cœur sublime"

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<sup>28</sup> "And it's since then [Sappho's death] that Lesbos started to moan."

<sup>29</sup> "For Lesbos chose me out of all poets on earth to sing the secret of her flowering virgins, and since childhood I have been admitted to the dark mystery of excessive laughter mixed with somber tears. For Lesbos chose me out of all poets on earth. And since then I have stayed on guard on the top of Leucate, like a sentinel with a piercing and certain eye, who watches day and night for brigs and frigates—whose shapes from afar shiver in the blue sky. And since then I have stayed on guard on the top of Leucate."

(“virgins of the sublime heart”) and, more importantly, was addressing the fate of these lesbians in judiciary and moral terms:

Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste?

Vierges au cœur sublime, honneur de l’archipel,

Votre religion comme une autre est auguste,

Et l’amour se rira de l’Enfer et du Ciel!

Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste? (*OC* 1: 151)<sup>30</sup>

Then, with no conspicuous causal connection, the Poet throws in this *car* in the ninth stanza to arbitrarily establish not only his connection with Lesbos but also the relevance of his poetry to religion, law, and justice. The intrusiveness of this “*car*” generates two possibilities: either the Poet’s poetic vocation begins as an outcome of his sympathizing with these condemned women, or his enunciative moment marks the starting point of Lesbian history. Either way, the Poet intends to address the limits and limitations of the discourse of law and justice (“Que nous veulent les lois du juste et de l’injuste?”). Moreover, the writing here promises an ethics in that this writing, in its act of enunciation, enables a history of the condemned to take place beyond the confines of human laws and cults.

“Femmes damnées” also undergoes a change of narrative perspectives. The first half of the poem appears to be an impersonal depiction of lesbian women as “bétail pensif” (“pensive cattle”), but the second half turns into a second-person address to Bacchus, whom the Poet calls “endormeur des remords anciens” (“the deceiver of ancient remorse”; *OC* 1: 113, 114). The Poet’s monologue to the god of drunken revelry focuses on sensory images of the lesbian women: how their eyes turn towards the horizon, how their feet reach for each other’s bodies, and how they

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<sup>30</sup> “What do laws of justice and injustice want from us? Virgins of the sublime heart, honor of the archipelago. Your religion, like another religion, is august, and love will ignore the Hell and the Heaven! What do laws of justice and injustice want from us?”

indulge themselves in secretive conversations. All of this representation, too, is facilitated by the always-ness of the present tense. Towards the end, however, the Poet turns to these women and cries out to them in a most urgent tone. His apostrophes, once again, reveal that the determining mode of temporality for poetic and historical cognition in this *other* world is the Poet's "writing present":

Ô vierges, ô démons, ô monstres, ô martyres,  
De la réalité grands esprits contempteurs,  
Chercheuses d'infini, dévotes et satyres,  
Tantôt pleines de cris, tantôt pleines de pleurs,

Vous que dans votre enfer mon âme a poursuivies,  
Pauvres sœurs, je vous aime autant que je vous plains,  
Pour vos mornes douleurs, vos soifs inassouvies,

Et les urnes d'amour dont vos grands cœurs sont pleins! (*OC* 1: 114)<sup>31</sup>

"Delphine et Hippolyte" consists of the Poet's third-person depiction of Delphine and Hippolyte, a dialogue between the two heroines, and the Poet's final comment. The first part is carried out in *l'imparfait*, a past or past progressive tense. The past mode lends a feeling of historical reality (something already happened) while the progressive mode produces a sensory reality (as if the reader was there watching). All of this "realness" seems to be furthered by the direct quotations in the dialogue. Yet, in effect, it does not take long before the artificiality of the dialogical setting reveals itself. Delphine and Hippolyte speak almost exactly in the same way as the narrating Poet outside the dramatic dialogue: with the same diction, the same

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<sup>31</sup> "O virgins, demons, monsters, martyrs! You in your proud spirit contempt reality. You are seekers of infinity, devotees and satyrs—one moment full of cries, and the next moment full of tears. You whom, in your hell, my soul has followed—poor sisters, I love you as much as I pity you, for your gloomy pain, for your insatiable thirst, and for the urns of love that fill your noble hearts."

metaphors, and the same sentiment. It seems that the Poet cannot “decode” the two heroines properly without the translation of similes and metaphors: “le rideau de sa jeune candeur” (“the curtain of her young innocence”); “Ainsi qu’un voyageur qui retourne la tête / Vers les horizons bleus dépassés le matin” (“like a traveler who turns his head towards the blue horizons passed in the morning”); “ses bras vaincus, jetés comme de vaines armes” (“her arms conquered, dropped like useless weapons”); “Delphine . . . / Comme un animal fort qui surveille une proie” (“Delphine . . . like a strong animal watching her prey”); “s’allongeait vers elle, / Comme pour recueillir un doux remerciement” (“lying down near [Hippolyte] as if she wanted to receive sweet gratitude”); “Delphine secouant sa crinière tragique, / Et comme trépignant sur le trépied de fer, / L’œil fatal, répondit d’une voix despotique” (“Delphine shook her tragic hair, and, as if trampling on the iron tripod, with fatal eyes, she responded with a despotic voice”).

Figures of speech inundate the first part of the poem, and they continue into the dialogue between the two heroines: “l’holocauste sacré de tes premières roses” (“the sacred holocaust of your first flowers”); “mes baisers sont légers comme ces éphémères” (“my kisses are as light as ephemeral mayflies”); “ceux de ton amant creuseront leurs ornières / Comme des chariots ou des socs déchirants” (“your lover’s kisses leave ruts just like carts or ploughs do”); “ils passeront sur toi comme un lourd attelage” (“your lover’s kisses trample over you like a heavy harness”); “je souffre et je suis inquiète, / Comme après un nocturne et terrible repas” (“I suffer and I feel disquieted like coming back from an evening prayer and a terrible dinner”); “Je sens s’élargir dans mon être / Un abîme béant; cet abîme est mon cœur” (“I feel that a wide abyss is enlarging in my being, and this abyss is my heart”); “brûlant comme un volcan, profond comme le vide” (“scorching hot as a volcano, deep as the void”) (*OC* 1: 152-54). Based on the predominance of these tropes, critics have argued for

multiple gender identifications on the part of the Poet, or at least for his manipulation of gender roles. I would argue, however, that the amplex of similes here indicates the artificiality of the Poet's rapport with these female figures. I will return to this point later.

Critics have suggested that the last five stanzas of this poem were added only later, possibly a few days before the publication of the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* to avoid censorship (Pichois, *OC* 1: 1126-27). These stanzas are separated from the preceding ones with a dash, and, here, the Poet addresses the heroines directly:

--Descendez, descendez, lamentables victimes,  
 Descendez le chemin de l'enfer éternel!  
 Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes,  
 Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,  
  
 Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d'orage.  
 .....  
 Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées,  
 À travers les déserts courez comme les loups;  
 Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées,  
 Et fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous! (*OC* 1: 155)<sup>32</sup>

At first, this addition indeed seems to convey a severe, even clichéd, condemnation of these women. The first and the last verses, nevertheless, would disrupt the superficial moral pedagogy. In the first verse, the Poet shows his sympathy by calling these women "lamentables victimes." The last verse also manages to dilute

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<sup>32</sup> "Go down, go down, lamentable victims. Go down to the road of eternal hell. Plunge into the deepest gulf, where all the crimes, flagellated by a wind that is not from heaven, roar chaotically with a stormy noise. . . . Far away from living people, wandering and condemned, run across deserts like wolves. Create your own destiny, disordered souls, and flee the infinity that you carry within you!"

the putative moralist doctrine by lending itself to ambiguity. In the other “Femmes damnées” poem, in which the Poet’s compassion for these women is unmistakable, lesbian women are also portrayed as “chercheuses d’infini” (“seekers of infinity”). Why, then, would the Poet here urge them to flee infinity? If the destiny of these women lies in an *other* world, why does he suggest that they abandon infinity since infinity appears to be the time marker of that *other* world (be it infinite curse or infinite felicity)? Wouldn’t the abandoning of infinity turn the heroines into historical beings bound by historical time (“peuples vivants”), whom the Poet also advises the heroines to shun? If it is true that these last verses were a last-minute addition, it does not seem unfair to argue that the Poet in effect is disguising his sympathy, hiding it beneath this ambiguity. After all, he is urging the heroines to flee and to create their own fate. Their fate, to be sure, is possible only in a world other than the human one.

All three Lesbian Poems are placed in a mythical milieu: Lesbos is the mother of “des jeux latins et des voluptés grecques” (“Latin pleasures and Greek sensuality”; *OC* 1: 150); Sappho is “plus belle que Vénus” (“more beautiful than Venus”; *OC* 1: 151); and other mythical figures such as Hippolyte, Bacchus, St. Antoine, and the satyrs are also important actors here.<sup>33</sup> If, as argued earlier, the mistress and the prostitute articulate the confusing experience of modernity—that is, the concurrent encounter with eternity and transitoriness, creation and destruction, infinity and oblivion—the lesbian figure bespeaks a different sense of time. As shown above, the temporality in the three Lesbian Poems is a timelessness virtually punctuated by the Poet’s present. It is the Poet’s present, rather than the lesbian women’s existence, that serves as the vantage point for poetic imagination, historical cognition, and, above all, ethical engagement. This, however, is not to say that the Poet in the Lesbian Poems

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<sup>33</sup> See Claude Pichois’s notes (*OC* 1: 1128) for possible sources for figures of Delphine and Hippolyte—especially the connection of the latter with the Amazons.



means to show the same kind of anachronism as in, for instance, the Prostitute Poems. Rather, registered in the Lesbian Poems is an artificially fabricated chronotope that is devised to escape the false eternity of *this* historical world; it is a new eternity rendered possible by the Poet's writing of the hitherto unwritten, that is, lesbian eros. As the arbitrary conjunction-word "car" in "Lesbos" suggests, artificiality is the keyword here.

Baudelaire has famously pronounced his detestation of naturalness (either in women or in art) while stressing the primacy of artificiality in his poetics:

La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire abominable. (*Mon cœur mis à nu*, OC 1: 677; emphasis in the original)<sup>34</sup>

Tout ce qui est beau et noble est le résultat de la raison et du calcul. Le crime, dont l'animal humain a puisé le goût dans le ventre de sa mère, est originellement naturel. La vertu, au contraire, est *artificielle*, surnaturelle, puisqu'il a fallu, dans tous les temps et chez toutes les nations, des dieux et des prophètes pour l'enseigner à l'humanité animalisée, et que l'homme, *seul*, eût été impuissant à la découvrir. Le mal se fait sans effort, *naturellement*, par fatalité; le bien est toujours le produit d'un art. ("Peintre," OC 2: 715; emphasis in the original)<sup>35</sup>

In this context, it would be easier to explain why the mistress figure very often signals an uncontainable alterity, one that the Poet feels impelled to manipulate for the sake of his creative power (see note 9). It is also in this context that the centrality of

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<sup>34</sup> "The female is *natural*, that is to say abominable."

<sup>35</sup> "All that is fine and noble is the outcome of reason and calculation. Crime, for which the human animal started developing a taste since he was in his mother's womb, is originally natural. Virtue, on the contrary, is *artificial* and supernatural, since at all times and in all countries, we needed gods and prophets to teach animalized humankind what virtue is, and man *alone* had been incapable of discovering it. Evil is committed effortlessly, *naturally*, by fate; good is always the product of an art."

the lesbian figure in relation to the Poet's poetic enterprise can be better appreciated. In the next section, I will relate the primacy of artificiality in the Baudelairean system to other poetic practices of his Poet persona—such as poetic identification and the subject-object dynamic—and address the problem of why the Poet has sought to form an artificial community with lesbian women.

### III. Gender Trouble

As mentioned above, many critics approach Baudelaire's lesbian subject in light of gender ambiguity. Thaïs Morgan, following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's classic model, contends that there are multiple identifications operating in the Lesbian Poems, and that by misrepresenting male-male desire through lesbian bodies, Baudelaire manages to retain a normative masculinity and a heterosexual model of gender identification:

. . . Baudelaire's ambiguation of genders in this lesbian couple [Delphine and Hippolyte]—each woman is both masculine and feminine—enables the male poet-reader to move rapidly back and forth between opposable subject-positions on the axes of both gender and sexual orientation. When he wishes to desire the Other as a heterosexual male, the writer-reader can identify with Delphine, the masculinized woman whose gaze and hand have clearly mastered the feminized object of desire, Hippolyta (sic). Or, when he wishes to be desired as the Other himself—that is, as Woman—the writer-reader can identify with Hippolyta. Alternatively, when the writer-reader desires the Same as a homosexual male, he occupies both the feminized lesbian and the masculinized lesbian positions simultaneously, without risking his gender identity—that is, his masculinity—because whenever he feels

threatened or excessively feminized (the Hippolyta position), he can flip back to identifying with the masculine member of the couple (the Delphine position). It is at this moment of double identification with both gender positions within the same-sex couple that the male writer-reader becomes what I call a male lesbian. (46)

Morgan wants to critique the male writer's appropriation of the lesbian figure in order to maintain or reproduce masculinity. Morgan's problem, however, lies in her own reproduction of the stereotypical gender roles of masculinity and femininity in both heterosexual and homosexual identifications. It is also debatable whether Morgan's reading would not paralyze all male writers' attempts to portray lesbian eros, since all these attempts could be easily relegated to nothing but a sinister masculinizing scheme.

Another critic, Nicholas Kostis, links the aggressive image of Delphine to Baudelaire's masochistic psyche, claiming that the play with female homosexuality disguises Baudelaire's androgynous desire. According to Kostis, to solve inner conflicts occasioned by his sexual "abnormality," Baudelaire (the author) draws on the "magic" of poetic images to assimilate different roles into his own subjectivity. Thus, sexual transpositions and the interchangeability of subject and object are essential to his creation of poetry. This is manifest in his fascination with images of aggressive women, androgynous eroticism, and masochistic pleasures.

Kostis's association of Baudelaire's gender ambiguity with the latter's propensity for conflated subject-object relationships insightfully points to the predominant object-images in *Les Fleurs du mal*, such as cats, bottles, hair, and ships. Kostis explains the ontological grounding of this poetic device:

This foundation of Baudelaire's technical innovation in poetry is the belief that there exists in nature an object which corresponds to every

subjective or psychological state: “Qu’est-ce que l’art pur suivant la conception moderne? C’est créer une magie suggestive contenant à la fois l’objet et le sujet, le monde extérieur à l’artiste et l’artiste lui-même.”<sup>36</sup> This linguistic and ontological confounding of subject with object is a poetic operation indispensable to the poet in expressing his deepest psychological structure. Only through a superimposition or interchangeability of subject-object can he hope to make the sexual and emotional transpositions necessary to assuage and defend his inner state. (52)

Kostis’s argument pivots on the series of masochistic transferences that assist Baudelaire in ultimately achieving a harmonious poetic ideal. For example, in the two “Le Chat” poems, Kostis claims, it is through the action of an object, the cat, that the Poet finds a psychic bridge between his own subjectivity and that of the mistress. What is involved here includes the Poet’s absorption of the female being, transposition of the penis and the aggressive role to the woman, the Poet’s masochistic subjectification of his own being, as well as his “making place for the female psyche to enter and displace and unite with his own psyche” (54-55). Kostis further identifies two groups of poems in terms of their poetic achievement: in the “Spleen et Idéal” section the Poet’s masochistic suffering leads to the creation of beauty while in the “Fleurs du mal” section (where the Lesbian Poems and Prostitute Poems are located) masochism and sexual perversion eventually amount to the ruin of the poetic process. In the “Fleurs du mal” section, according to Kostis, “poetry is an agent of bondage, synonymous with the poet’s process of self-humiliation. The sexual bondage now

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<sup>36</sup> “What is pure art, according to the modern idea? It is to create a magic that contains the object and the subject at the same time, the external world outside of the artist and the artist himself” (“L’Art Philosophique,” *OC* 2: 598).

becomes the poetic bondage as poetry ceases to offer an escape from masochistic love” (67).

Kostis is right about the epistemological centrality of object-images in *Les Fleurs du mal*.<sup>37</sup> He is also right in pointing out the ontological underpinnings of the Poet’s artistic manifestations. Yet Kostis’s reading of the Lesbian Poems, which proceeds in the same fashion as his reading of other poems, falls short of explaining certain isolated characteristics of the Lesbian Poems—this hermeneutic flaw will be clearer in the discussion that follows.

One central poetic idea/ideal of Baudelaire’s is “les transports de l’esprit et des sens” (“transpositions of spirit and senses”; “Correspondances,” *OC* 1: 11).<sup>38</sup> Perfumes would emit a fragrance as sweet as the baby’s flesh or as the sound of the oboe—all scents, all colors, and all sounds would correspond to one another. It is noteworthy that such a state of “correspondance” rarely takes place in the Poet’s direct encounter with women; correspondence only transpires when there are other objects involved—objects other than the female figure. Furthermore, after a series of sensuous transpositions, this correspondence very often leads to nothing other than the Poet’s self-reflexivity:

Quand mes yeux, vers ce chat que j’aime  
Tirés comme par un aimant,  
Se retournent docilement  
Et que je regarde en moi-même,

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<sup>37</sup> It is, however, debatable as to whether the subject-object transpositions in famous poems like “Parfum exotique,” “Le Chevelure,” and “Le Beau Navire” work precisely in the same way as the two “Chat” poems. For, in the former three poems, women function as the initiative point of the Poet’s sexual and poetic fantasizing and eventually lead the Poet to the world of objects—this is also the main argument of critic Leo Bersani. In “Le Chat” poems, on the other hand, it is the external object, the cat, that enables the poet to relate with his lover.

<sup>38</sup> See Paul de Man’s famous reading of the poem “Correspondances.”

Je vois avec étonnement  
 Le feu de ses prunelles pâles,  
 Clairs fanaux, vivantes opales,  
 Qui me contemplent fixement. ("Le Chat," *OC* 1: 51)<sup>39</sup>

Critic Michel Deguy describes this unique poetics of Baudelaire's as a "*theology of the thing*" (190). By this Deguy means the extension of possibilities rendered palpable by the use of metaphors: "The poetic transaction offered through a comparison—or rapprochement—in the general form of A *or* B holds in reserve a possibility offered (and refusable) to future *recognition* (in other *circumstances* wherein the *relation* in question recurs). Thus the poem itself is an 'expansion of infinite things'; a place where things not finite may be extended, expanded . . . or *an extension of possibility upon the world*" (189; emphasis in the original). For Deguy, the ultimate poetic experience is to provide possibilities by way of sensory, emotional, psychological, and cognitive transpositions.

To be certain, Deguy's critical paradigm works for the majority of the "female" poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*. The predominant form of figurative language in the Mistress cluster is indeed the metaphor, especially an extended metaphor that runs through the entire poem as the central image: for instance, the famous oceanic imagery in "Le Beau Navire," "L'Invitation au Voyage," "Parfum exotique," and "Le Chevelure"; the closed-box imagery (coffin, flask, boudoir) in "Le Falcon," "Correspondances," and "Spleen"; the animal imagery in "Le Serpent qui danse" and "Le Chat"; and, above all, the satanic imagery of women throughout the cluster. One may even venture to say that the originality of these extended metaphors well attests to the popularity of these poems in Baudelaire scholarship.

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<sup>39</sup> "When my eyes, as if drawn by a magnet, are drawn to the cat that I love and that I see in myself, and then return docilely, I see with amazement the fire of the pale pupils, bright torches, and living opals which gaze at me firmly."

Metaphors in the Mistress and Prostitute clusters, all in all, demonstrate “les transports de l’esprit et des sens”—be it heavenly fantasizing or nightmarish encounters with the wrong muse—and henceforth also a subject-object confluence. That is, the extended process of imagining or image-making oftentimes would mobilize the interpenetration of the subject and the object. Thus, the Poet’s enjoyment of the state of “correspondance” has to be facilitated by his mistress (who can function both as object and as subject), and his fantasized adventures happen only after his subjectivity is taken over by the mistress—in other words, he objectifies himself in order to enjoy the sensory pleasures as a subject. Or, the Poet sees himself in the cat, which, as Kostis has pointed out, serves as a medium for the fulfillment of the Poet’s fantasizing.

In the Lesbian Poems, however, it is simile (in the mechanical formula of “A is like B”) that abounds. Unlike the metaphor, which suggests an organic correspondence between the sign and the image-product, the simile generally comes across as an artificial construct in which the relationship between the two terms depends heavily on the preposition “like.” Moreover, as shown in the previous section, the similes in the Lesbian Poems—which only exist on a local scale and rarely go beyond the length of a stanza—are so numerous that the Poet seems unable to read the lesbian heroines without constantly changing the lens through which he observes these women. What strikes home here is the absolute otherness of these lesbian figures to the Poet—so radically *other* that the Poet cannot even manipulate the femaleness of the lesbians as he does that of the mistress figure and the prostitute figure. Moreover, if “les transports de l’esprit et des sens” stands as the central aesthetics or epistemology in the Mistress Poems, the Lesbian Poems specifically name not only the impossibility but also the immorality of conflating different sensuous and cognitive experiences:

Celui qui veut unir dans un accord mystique

L'ombre avec la chaleur, la nuit avec le jour,  
 Ne chauffera jamais son corps paralytique  
 À ce rouge soleil que l'on nomme l'amour! ("Delphine et Hippolyte,"  
*OC* 1: 154)<sup>40</sup>

Once again, the Lesbian Poems reveal a distinctive poetics to the extent that they appear to contradict Baudelaire's central idea of "correspondance." Yet, given the distressing nature of the Poet's poetic/epistemological experience with heterosexual women, the Lesbian Poems may very well be the only chance for him to avoid the misrecognition or misrepresentation of his poetic inspiration in the mistress and the prostitute.

#### IV. The Unavowable Community

How different, then, is the subject-object dynamic in the Lesbian Poems from that in other clusters?

Tackling the lesbian subject in Baudelaire, one cannot ignore a poem that the young poet wrote addressing the-then established poet Sainte-Beuve. This poem, not included in *Les Fleurs du mal*, suggestively invites a reading in terms of double homoeroticism. First of all, the young Poet in the poem unmistakably articulates a homoerotic-sounding identification with the veteran poet:

Poète, est-ce une injure ou bien un compliment?  
 Car je suis vis-à-vis de vous comme un amant  
 En face du fantôme, au geste plein d'amorces,  
 Dont la main et dont l'œil ont pour pomper les forces  
 Des charmes inconnus. –Tous les êtres aimés

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<sup>40</sup> "He who wants to unite shadow and heat, night and day, in a mystical accord, shall never warm his paralyzed body under that sun which we call love."



Sont des vases de fiel qu'on boit les yeux fermés (*OC* 1: 208)<sup>41</sup>

This is the closing stanza of the poem. While homoeroticism is ostensibly present, many details in effect emerge to unsettle the homoerotic elements. For example, the young Poet's love object is likened to a phantom image, and the young Poet's amorous journey is taken in an unknown realm ("charmes inconnus"). Furthermore, the Poet suggests that all the loved ones are bitter "vases of gall" that he drinks *with his eyes closed*. All these clues point to an intricate play between sameness and difference, between identification and non-identification—or, more precisely, between the possibility and impossibility of identification. The final image of "eyes closed" will further disturb the predominant mirror image in the earlier stanzas of the poem, where the Poet compares his fate as an aspiring writer to the fate of lesbian girls:

—Et puis venaient les soirs malsains, les nuits fiévreuses,  
 Qui rendent de leur corps les filles amoureuses,  
 Et les font aux *miroirs*—stérile *volupté*—  
 Contempler les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité—  
 .....  
 —J'ai partout feuilleté le mystère profond  
 De ce livre si cher aux âmes engourdies  
 Que leur destin marqua des mêmes maladies,  
 Et devant *le miroir* j'ai perfectionné  
 L'art cruel qu'un Démon en naissant m'a donné,  
 —De la Douleur pour faire une *volupté* vraie, —  
 D'ensanglanter son mal et de gratter sa plaie. (*OC* 1:207-208;  
 emphasis mine)<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Poet—is it an insult or rather a compliment? For, with regard to you, I am like a lover facing a ghost, with a gesture full of baits, and whose hands and eyes are to pump forces out of unknown spells. —All the loved ones are vases of gall that we drink with eyes closed."

The young Poet in his throes of writing dwells on homosexual girls in their affliction of love. The Poet calls the book that is so dear to numbed souls a “livre voluptueux” (“voluptuous book”). His ambition to write, thus, is marked by a sensuous and sensual desire—also something shared by lesbians, just as diseases are. The repetition of the word “volupté” emphatically suggests his identification with these women. So does the recurrence of the mirror image—his mirror in comparison with their mirrors.

The mirror image in this poem reveals a complex matrix of identifications. The singular mirror in the Poet’s chamber may well suggest a narcissistic self-love, yet this very mirror’s status as an echo of the lesbian mirrors also points to an outward identification, thus to something other than narcissism. As critic Dominique D. Fisher suggests, “Repetition and difference undo the narcissistic paradigm in a theater of writing where sameness, by means of a series of mirror images, is constantly asserted and diverted” (51). It is noteworthy that the Poet usually refers to lesbians in the plural form—while the mirror in his poetic world is singular, the lesbians’ mirrors always come in the plural form. Based on this nuance, one may have to think twice before concluding that there is an element of male lesbianism in the Poet. My argument is that, if there is any identification here, the Baudelairean Poet desires not so much to become a disguised lesbian figure as to watch what lesbians experience while he remains an *other* himself. What the Poet identifies with in the lesbians is the same otherness—an otherness that can be *shared* insofar as they both occupy a marginalized position punctuated by sickening nights, voluptuousness, disease, and pain. Thus, the

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<sup>42</sup> “—And then came those sickening evenings and feverish nights, which make girls fall in love with their bodies and make them contemplate, in *mirrors*—sterile *voluptuousness*—the mature fruits of their nobility. . . . I browsed through the profound mystery of this book so dear to numbed souls that their destiny marked the same diseases. And in front of *the mirror* I improved the cruel art that a Demon gave me upon my birth—the art of pain, so as to make a true *voluptuousness*, and the art of staining his illness with blood and of scratching his wound.”

stereotypical images of lesbian women in “Delphine et Hippolyte” should not be read as the Poet’s sinister maneuver of gender identifications, as many critics have suggested, but as the Poet’s precocious attempt to represent an unknown realm of knowledge, that is, lesbian eros. His true identity remains that of the Poet at the end of the poem, calling out to these heroines and hiding his compassion underneath moral fuzziness.

In comparison, the mirror image in the allegorized “Beauté,” where the eyes of Beauty are described as the purest mirrors that young poets look up to in vain for poetic inspiration, is but a hollow void that neither reflects nor generates anything. Nevertheless, if one only looks at the poem to Sainte-Beuve, one may easily jump to the conclusion that the Poet, after all, is manipulating the lesbian eros in order to shape his own writing subjectivity. For, despite his identification with these homosexual women, he claims that their voluptuousness is “stérile” while his is “vraie” (“true”). A gender-studies approach, then, seems to suffice here. Yet, if one compares this poem with the Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, a more nuanced reading is in order. The passage on identification with lesbians in the poem to Sainte-Beuve will find a variation, a repetition with difference, in “Lesbos”:

Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses,  
 Qui font qu’à leurs miroirs, stérile volupté!  
 Les filles aux yeux creux, de leurs corps amoureuses,  
 Caressent les fruits mûrs de leur nubilité;  
 Lesbos, terre des nuits chaudes et langoureuses (*OC* 1: 150)<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Lesbos, land of hot and languid nights, which make, in their mirrors, sterile voluptuousness! Girls with empty eyes, in love with their bodies, caress the mature fruits of their nubility.”

Although its diction is similar, “Lesbos” differs from the poem to Sainte-Beuve in many ways. First of all, in the poem to Sainte-Beuve, “stérile volupté” is closely associated with the fruits of lesbian nobility:

—Et puis venaient les soirs malsains, les nuits fiévreuses,  
 Qui rendent de leur corps les filles amoureuses,  
 Et les font aux miroirs—stérile volupté—  
 Contempler les fruits mûrs de leur nobilité—

In “Lesbos,” however, the reference of “stérile volupté” is less definite. For the reference of “leurs miroirs” is uncertain since “leurs” can refer to either the lesbian girls or the “nuits chaudes et langoureuses” (“hot and languid nights”). If the latter, “stérile volupté” can be merely the result of the languid land and henceforth is not to be so directly associated to the lesbian women. The Poet in “Lesbos” is not forcefully dismissing lesbian eros as sterile or wishing to fulfill his own literary desire through representations of lesbianism, as he seems to be doing in the poem to Sainte-Beuve.

Furthermore, in the poem to Sainte-Beuve, girls *are made to love* their bodies and *to contemplate* the “fruits of their nobility” in mirrors. In “Lesbos,” however, they *are in love with* their own bodies and *caress* the fruits of their nobility. Girls in the latter poem come across as more active agents of their action while in the poem to Sainte-Beuve they are more like objects in the Poet’s desire for a poetic vocation. The Lesbian Poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, to be sure, are closely related to the Poet’s poetic vision, but this vision does not work through a manipulation of lesbian eros as the poem to Sainte-Beuve so voluptuously suggests. The Poet in the Lesbian Poems claims that he has been chosen by the lesbian isle to “chanter le secret de ses vierges en fleurs” (“sing the secret of these flowering virgins”), and that his soul has been following these girls through their infernal world since childhood. In the narrative setting of these poems, however, no verbal exchange, eye contact, or other physical

communion is to be found between the spokesman for the lesbian land and the condemned women; the only form of connection between them is established by the Poet's own enunciation. One can even argue that the Poet's poetic vocation takes off at that very moment of self-enunciation—a moment of self-introduction translated into identification with an absolute Other *qua* the homosexual woman. There may well be a palpable act of silencing women in the Mistress Poems, as many critics have acutely pointed out; yet in the Lesbian Poems, the impossibility of communion/communication predominates. The Poet's recognition of his poetic vision is revealed and materialized in a recognition of his otherness in the otherness of lesbian women.

What philosopher Maurice Blanchot terms “communauté inavouable” ‘unavowable community’ can serve as a literal rendition of the rapport between Baudelaire's Poet persona and the lesbian subjects:

[The community] includes the exteriority of being that excludes it—an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech when the latter is not folded up in ways of speaking and hence does not permit any relation (of identity or alterity) with itself. Inasmuch as the community on behalf of everyone rules (for me and for itself) over a beside-oneself (its absence) that is its fate, it gives rise to an unshared though necessarily multiple speech in a way that does not let it develop itself in words: always already lost, it has to use, creates no work and does not glorify itself in that loss. Thus the gift of speech, a gift of “pure” loss that cannot make sure of ever being received by the other, even though the other is the only one to make possible, if not speech, then at least the supplication to speak which carries with it the risk of being rejected or lost or not received. Hence the foreboding that the community, in its

very failure, is linked to a certain kind of writing, a writing that has nothing else to search for than the last words: “Come, come, you for whom the injunction, the prayer, the expectation is not appropriate.”

(*Unavowable* 12)

Where the lesbian’s existence does not fit in “the injunction, the prayer, and the expectation” of society, ordinary speech—a carrier of identity and difference, hence also a medium of moral pedagogy—can turn violent. Consequently, speechlessness (or, in Blanchot’s words, “multiple speech” that does not reveal in words) may emerge both as a trace of the past trauma and as a potentiality for a different community—a community that can “accommodate” the experience with the impossible, a community whose possibility, literally, is mediated by way of writing.

While Blanchot’s model falls short of a historical dimension, the fact that Baudelaire articulates lesbian eros at a time when both writing and the epistemologization of modernity have become mutually generative ideological praxes suggests the ethical potential of writing—which I define here as the attentiveness to the impossible experience figured in the unattainability of communion and communication. As the pedagogical version of modernity is primarily registered by a power play of the subject vis-à-vis the object, the imperative of writing for/towards the other evinced in Baudelaire’s Lesbian Poems points to a distinctively different subject-object scenario. The mature Baudelaire may be remembered mostly for his manipulation of female objects and the gendered staging of his poetic settings. The young poet, nevertheless, does attempt to establish his poetic enterprise upon an ethical call prompted by the other-ed lesbian.

Most importantly, Baudelaire’s displacement of the idiom of difference in the formative stage of high modernity poses a timely irony on the pedagogy of modernity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Obscenity of Immediacy:

#### The Allegorical Impulse and the De-fetishization of Difference in

Salman Rushdie<sup>1</sup>

*Essentially, I have been arguing that the very possibility of imagining the nation only arose historically when, and where, three fundamental cultural conceptions, all of great antiquity, lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds. The first of these was the idea that a particular scrip-language offered privileged access to ontological truth . . . . Second was the belief that society was naturally organized around and under high centres—monarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who ruled by some form of cosmological (divine dispensation. . . . Third was a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable . . . .*

*--Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities*

In this chapter, I will contest the primacy of the idiom of difference in postcoloniality by looking at two major aspects of Salman Rushdie's novels: the relevance of allegory in postcolonial writing and thinking on the one hand, and the prevalence of imagist sameness in his writing on the other hand. As the first

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<sup>1</sup> Of Rushdie's primary works referred to hereafter in page references, *Midnight's Children* (1981; New York: Penguin, 1991) will be cited as *MC*; *Shame* (1983; New York: Vintage-Random, 1984) as *S*; *The Satanic Verses* (1988; New York: Viking-Penguin, 1989) as *SV*; and *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta-Penguin, 1991) as *IH*.

postcolonial writer I discuss in my study, Rushdie's writing serves as an exemplary case in my ontological examination of postcoloniality.

Allegory demands a reappraisal at the historical juncture called the postcolonial not really because this age-old literary mode has been accorded a privileged position in postcolonial literary studies—by which I am referring primarily to the debates occasioned by Fredric Jameson's famous claim about national allegory (*"the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society"* ["Third-World" 69; emphasis in the original]),<sup>2</sup> and the primacy of allegory promoted by some critics as the most legitimate mode of imaging the postcolonial experience.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I argue that postcolonial allegory, as evinced in Rushdie's novels, can emerge as a double-edged mode of historical cognition: naming postcoloniality on the one hand and posing a critique of postcoloniality on the other hand.

Typical allegorical interpretations tend to read Rushdie's writings as the embodiment of postcoloniality's fate. Often prompted by the novelist's textual manipulation (the most infamous one being his portrayal of a protagonist whose life ostensibly appears to be an allegory of the nation's life), these readings prematurely presume the failure of postcolonial nationhood to be the doom of postcoloniality in general. I propose, however, to focus on the allegorical impulse manifest in Rushdie's fictional characters and to consider the duality of allegory at work in his novels. As I will demonstrate in these pages, Rushdie's allegorical rendition of history bespeaks the overdetermination of the postcolonial—that is, a condition wherein the

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<sup>2</sup> See Jameson's 1986 essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Nationalism." More notes will follow in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Stephen Slemon's consistent valorization of allegory ("Revisioning"; "Monuments"; and "Post-Colonial"). I will comment on him in a moment.



postcolonial subject has to stumble through proliferated national, cultural, and linguistic metaphors, with the putative “national allegory” being the ultimate articulation of such metaphoricity. On the other hand, Rushdie eventually will undo the demands of national allegory into a rhetoric of hope—not by taking a detour around all the metaphors that constitute the cultural pedagogy nor by positing an antagonistic stance, but by cutting through the proliferated cultural determinants.

I find Benjamin’s conception of allegory highly relevant here because, for Benjamin, allegory too articulates a double inscription: it emerges as the symptom of modernity on the one hand and as a critique of modernity on the other hand. In addition, Benjamin’s imagist reading of history, which he pits against the epistemically violent historicism, resonates with the overflow of images in Rushdie’s novelistic narratives. Furthermore, the way in which Benjamin reads epistemo-ontological implications out of the texture of allegory provides a model as to how to epistemologize and ontologize literary texts. In my study, I concentrate on the relationship between the materiality of writing and the historical impulse named by this materiality. In Rushdie’s case, the accumulation and repetition of similar images in the narrative, I maintain, indicate the symptom of the overdetermined postcoloniality. As Benjamin has not been widely applied in postcolonial studies,<sup>4</sup> I place him and Rushdie in a virtual dialogue to see how their allegorical modes inform each other. The point of employing the popular Benjamin is not so much to transplant a useful analytical tool as to lay bare the epistemological convergence and divergence between postcoloniality and modernity. I argue that while the critical thrust of Benjamin’s notion of modern allegory lies partly in the time gap between the modern

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Brennan mentions Benjamin in passing in his *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*, arguably the first book-length study of Rushdie in the English-speaking world. Todd Kuchta, in a critical essay, (mis)uses Benjamin when discussing *Midnight’s Children*—on which I will comment later.

and the classical, the condition of possibility for Rushdie's allegory is the absence of such a time gap. To repeat Spivak once again, postcoloniality is a structure which one critiques and yet at the same time inhabits intimately ("Foundations" 158). Rushdie's profane illumination, in the same token, proceeds alongside an obscene immediacy.

In what follows, I will first address the stakes of allegorizing postcoloniality in a straightforward fashion. Then I will reevaluate Benjamin's theory of allegory, foregrounding the exigency of an allegorical perception of history that he has insightfully brought into light. Finally, in my close reading of Rushdie, I will examine the proliferation of allegorical manifestations in *Midnight's Children* and the motif of sameness in *The Satanic Verses*. I will argue that the allegorical impulse in Rushdie's characters (the urge to decode cultural master codes in accordance with pre-given pedagogy) indicates the impossibility of a break from historical overdetermination. Yet it is also in the process of decoding, misreading, and over-reading, that the interpretative authority of the master codes is diluted and defused, to the point that eventually the proliferation of coding/decoding turns into senselessness and senselessness into a break from the cultural pedagogy and its paraphernalia.

### **I. The Double Vision of Allegory and the Doubled History of Postcoloniality**

The period when postcolonial studies is emerging as a definitive academic practice happens to witness the naturalization of the conjunction between allegory and postcolonial literary imagination. The Canadian scholar Stephen Slemon, among others, wrote a series of essays in late 1980s elaborating on the privileged position of allegory for postcolonial writers (in fact, he prefers to use the hyphenated "post-colonial"). His main contention is predicated upon the openness to appropriation of allegory. A notable mode of myth-building in colonial discourse (Slemon's favorite example is the naming ritual in the prehistory of the Americas, when Columbus named

the first “discovered” New World islands based on the Christian canon and Spanish royal heritage), allegory in the hands of postcolonial writers automatically transforms into not only an ideal mode of storytelling but also a figure for postcolonial writing in general.

This dual session of postcolonial allegory derives from a set of premises. First of all, postcolonial writing is rendered possible by the existence of a pre-text. Slemon argues that a considerable number of postcolonial texts depend on the “prefigurative discourse of colonialism” for their mobilization. Allegory, in this regard, emerges as a cultural site “upon which certain forms of post-colonial writing engage head-on with the interpellative and tropological strategies of colonialism’s most visible figurative technology” (“Monuments” 11). Another key premise Slemon holds is the political necessity of viewing postcoloniality as textuality. Allegory’s peculiar way of reading a narrative is described by Slemon as follows: “the allegorical levels of meaning that open into history are bracketed off by a literal level of fiction interpolated between the historical events and the reader so as to displace the matter of history into a secondary level of the text accessible only through the mediation of the primary fictional level” (“Post-colonial” 160; an almost identical passage also appears in “Monuments” 12). Slemon’s argument is that the allegorical mode of representation exposes the fictionality of historical discourse; thus, in allegory, “it is fiction that determines the way we read history, history that is contingent upon fiction, and not the other way around” (“Post-colonial” 164-65).

There are some fuzzy moments in Slemon’s argumentation, including his essentializing “the literary” as “the literal,” his collapsing “the literal” and “the fictional,” as well as his assuming simultaneously allegory’s natural affinity with imperialist thinking *and* with postcolonial emancipatory imagination. It is not my primary intent to elaborate on these problems here (which can be summed up as too

much essentialization). Yet to preview one key issue in the following sections, I would like to call attention to one particular point that Slemon puts forward, that is, the way in which allegory emerges as an affirmative trope for postcolonial writing in general. Slemon makes this point by arguing for a hierarchy of temporality: first, allegory is constituted by a time gap; secondly, the postcolonial present surpasses the colonial past by all accounts. His viewpoint will be echoed by many other postcolonial-theory practitioners, especially critics from former settler colonies. The groundbreaking work in postcolonial studies, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, for instance, emphatically foregrounds “appropriation” as the primary mode of postcolonial writing, which, to a great extent, resembles the double vision that informs the commonplace sense of allegory.

Jameson’s “Third-World Literature” essay, to be sure, also resorts to the common-sensical conception of allegory when he claims that third-world writing “necessarily project[s] a political dimension in the form of national allegory” (69). While his essay has provoked enough debates,<sup>5</sup> what has not been heeded is that all these debates exemplify, among other things, the ongoing tug-of-war between the

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<sup>5</sup> The most frequently cited critique of this essay is by Aijaz Ahmad, who reprimands Jameson’s indiscriminate appropriation of the “three worlds” theory. Trying to make Marxist sensibility vibrantly valid in contemporary cultural critique, Ahmad turns to the model of capital/labor struggle in configuring the world and argues that “we live not in three worlds but in one” (“Jameson’s” 9). Other major problems that Ahmad identifies in Jameson’s reasoning include the latter’s construction of a binary opposition between a capitalist first world and a pre- or non-capitalist third world; the private/public separation as an exclusively capitalist characteristic; national experience of colonialism and imperialism as the single determining characteristic of the third world; and the conflation of “nation” with “culture,” “society,” and “collectivity.” For more comments on Jameson, also see Jean Franco, who draws on examples from Latin American literature to illustrate the inadequacy of Jameson’s generalization. Slemon himself, on the other hand, is rather ambivalent about Jameson’s essay. On the one hand, he demands “a realignment of the modality of critical access away from the determining structure of the first-world/third-world binary into the problematics of what might more accurately be called the conditions of post-coloniality” (“Monuments” 9-10). On the other hand, Slemon converges with Jameson on seeing postcolonial or third-world allegory as being conditioned by a division between the private and the public realms (13). In a different vein, Imre Szeman espouses Jameson’s claim by placing “national allegory” within a contextual relationship with other theses that Jameson has put forward, such as the relevance of form. Szeman subscribes to Jameson’s generalization and contends that there is a political dimension to third-world texts “that is now (and has perhaps long been) absent in their first world counterparts” (807).

primacy of generalities and that of particulars in postcolonial discourse, the stakes of which I have tried to address in Chapter One.

Another thing that has not invited enough attention is the way in which Jameson touches upon the overdetermined relationship between literary production and this particular historical moment called “the third world.” Imre Szeman suggests reading Jameson’s notion of national allegory vis-à-vis the concept of metacommentary that Jameson has developed earlier in his career: “Every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary” (qtd. in Szeman 823).<sup>6</sup> Jameson’s “metacommentary” resonates remotely with the notion of “complicity” often identified in Rushdie’s writing, which I will get to in a moment. Suffice it to say now that, even though “metacommentary” seems to resemble the Rushdian allegory I set out to foreground, there is a register of transparency in “metacommentary” in its presumption of an active production of self-interpretation. Rushdie’s allegory, in contrast, finds potential redemption by cutting through muddy paths and, very often, by accident.

## II. The Politics of Allegorizing Rushdie

Rushdie himself once remarked on the ethico-political valence of form in his novels: “The story of Saleem [the narrator-protagonist of *Midnight’s Children*] does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop self-generation. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it ‘teems.’ *The form—multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country—is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy*” (IH 16; emphasis mine). While the

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<sup>6</sup> The original text is “Metacommentary,” *PMLA* 86 (1971): 9-17; the quotation is from p. 10.

author's self-interpretation always needs to be taken with a grain of salt, Rushdie is not the only person mindful of the overdetermination of form in his writing. Many Rushdie critics have shown ambivalence towards the necessity evil of form. Here I will focus on two major critics, examining their conceptualization of the complicity between Rushdie's form and the problematic aspects of postcoloniality. As their readings of postcolonial literature, like Slemon's and Jameson's, also pivot on the commonplace sense of allegory, my analysis is meant to zoom in on the stakes of binding postcolonial writing with allegory.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that, for Timothy Brennan, the political orientation of the author ought to be reflected in the form of his/her creation, and the destiny of the work is predetermined by the author's ideological choice. The "failure" of Rushdie's first published novel, *Grimus*, according to Brennan, lies in the novel's lack of a "habitus"—in this case, a political community such as nation: "It would be hard to find a novel that demonstrated better the truth of Fanon's claim that a culture that is not national is meaningless" (70). Or, when comparing Rushdie's novels about India and his journalist prose work on Nicaragua (*The Jaguar Smile*), Brennan contends that Nicaragua, "by virtue of what it represents politically," lacks the condition to be the subject of a novel. That is, in war-battered places like Nicaragua, the distinction between "truth" and "untruth" is not so much an issue of debate as a conspicuous fact. In contrast, India can be perfectly represented in the novelistic form not only because "India itself evokes a distinct national essence," but also because the problematic politics of Pakistan and India seems to "beg[] for the novel form as if to help problematise them at an existential level (64). Or, "the nexus of fiction and

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<sup>7</sup> Aside from Timothy Brennan and Sara Suleri, on whom I will elaborate here, also see Jean M. Kane, who links the failure of *Midnight's Children's* political efficacy to the failure of its form; and Nasser Hussain, who addresses the author's "complicity" in relation to the cultural process of "shame."

nationalism in this period occurs within the borders of the nation-state—that is, in the apparatuses of ideological control” (97). Inspired by the ensemble of Mikhail Bakhtin, Regis Debray, and Benedict Anderson, who all address the ontological significance of the modern nation, Brennan sees the postcolonial world as another time of disintegration in history and foregrounds the formalistic correspondence between novelistic heteroglossia and the presumably heterogeneous postcolonial national community.<sup>8</sup> Yet at the same time, Brennan also contends that, while the modern novel once served as a liberating tool as it sought to incorporate voices of the lower class into literary imagination, the post-war novel in the third world has turned into a privilege for the elite alone.

More precisely, the linkage point between the possibility of postcolonial nationalism and the possibility of fiction, for Brennan, is class-specific. Seeing *Midnight's Children* as a metafiction about the production of the third-world literature, Brennan detects in the protagonist's narrative a built-in corruption on the part of the postcolonial (“neo-colonial” in Brennan's wording) national elite. Brennan intends to show that not only is the failure of the newly independent nation the responsibility of the domestic elite, the failure of this class is best illustrated through nothing other than the writer figure:

In exploring his own culpability for the events of the novel, Saleem determines responsibility not only by his acquiescence . . . , or by his

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<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin's overarching proposition in *The Dialogic Imagination* stipulates that the rise of novelistic discourse corresponds to the historical fact that “the world becomes polyglot” (qtd. in Brennan 9). Debray, in “Marxism and the National Question” in particular, stresses the “natural” and “sacred” quality that constitutes the nation: “[The form of the nation-state] is created from a natural organization proper to *homo sapiens*, one through which life itself is rendered untouchable or sacred. This sacred character constitutes the real national question” (qtd. in Brennan 10; emphasis in the original). Anderson's much cited work, *Imagined Communities*, echoes the former two theorists in evoking the nation's ontological functions, such as the nation's takeover of the role of religion in dealing with death, continuity, and the desire for origins. For recent inquiry into the ontological underpinnings of the modern nation-state in relation to the postcolonial experience, see Pheng Cheah (*Spectral*; “Living On”)

sharing of the desires and human failings of the more visible culprits, but specifically as a writer—a creator of communicative fictions. Guilt is centred in, and emanates from, the writer himself, extending to all his creations. This conforms to the book’s central trope in which Saleem contains India’s multitudes within him. Authorial ambiguity translates into bi-polar morality in which every group has a good and a bad expression. (89)

For Brennan, thus, the postcolonial national consciousness, to a great extent, is grounded in the elite’s capacity of fiction-building—here, “fiction” denotes any type of discursive practice (the construction of national history included) as well as the novelistic form. Brennan arrives at the conclusion that the most fatal and unfortunate mistake of Saleem’s narrative is that “he proliferates *metaphor* and master illusion (‘dreams’)” (98; emphasis in the original). The “Indian talent for non-stop self-generation” that Rushdie himself champions ends up becoming a “paradigm of the state lie” entertained by Saleem.

One major problem in Brennan’s reasoning falls upon his mixture of different levels of discourses in the framework of the novel. On the one hand, he acknowledges Rushdie’s intention in denying the reader an “organic” narrative that “progresses uninterrupted, and that creates a completely imagined world” (85). On the other hand, however, Brennan translates the inadequacy of the fictional character’s configuration of history into the inadequacy of postcolonial writing, and further into the essentially inadequate position of the migrant author.

For Brennan, in other words, Rushdie’s fiction allegorizes the predicament of postcoloniality—on this point, his argumentation is echoed by many other critics.<sup>9</sup> A foremost assumption of these critics is that a configuration of postcoloniality is made

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jane M. Kane; Nasser Hussain; and Sara Suleri.



possible insofar as the latter is considered in intense figurative terms. While this theoretical move is not entirely mistaken, these critiques tend to be paralyzed when they show an obsession with biographical readings at the expense of the “formal” question, that is, the ethico-political implication of writing/reading postcoloniality figuratively. In other words, the figurative or allegorical linings of Rushdie’s writing, in these critics’ understanding, are often undermined because of the wrong realism located in the author’s life.

Sara Suleri, to a great extent, shares Brennan’s figurative reading of Rushdie’s writing. The chapter on Rushdie in her book *The Rhetoric of English India* suggests that not only should postcoloniality be conceptualized figuratively, the very figure for postcoloniality’s figurativeness is fictional writing per se.

Suleri’s configuration of postcoloniality presumes the impossibility of postcolonial writing, of which she thinks Rushdie’s novels are exemplary—“impossibility” indicates not so much the nonexistence of postcolonial writing as the dilemmatic condition facing the postcolonial writer. Rushdie’s 1983 novel *Shame* makes an illustrative case in this regard for Suleri. Taking up as its subject matter the political turmoil in post-Independence Pakistan, *Shame* centers around the nation’s one-time powerful politician Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. For Suleri, *Shame* works through salient allegory—rather than “thinly veiled” allegory, as many critics have suggested—on various levels. On one level, the novel allegorizes the schizophrenic character of a postcolonial novel—that is, an awareness of censorship and an anticipation of different readerships (Western vs. Indian subcontinental) are inscribed in the novel’s structure, and so is the fear that the novel is playing with the kind of will to power that has driven most colonial narratives (Suleri 176). Hence an ostensible sense of self-fabrication and that of shame or guilt in the narrative. Ironically, such a

tint of shamefulness, Suleri argues, is exactly what constitutes postcolonial writing's "aesthetic of novelty" (175).

Throughout her lucid reasoning, however, Suleri reveals a schizophrenia on her part from time to time. Her reading of *Shame*, dismissive to some extent, stands incommensurable with her relatively appreciative reception of Rushdie's 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*. The critical discrepancy, I argue, results from her erratic dealings with the literalism-allegory dynamic in Rushdie's texts. *Shame* is problematic, according to her, in that it carefully manipulates the role of censorship in order to shift the responsibility of ethical judgment from the novelist to the reader. To facilitate this evasion of responsibility, the novel deliberately lodges itself in highly formalistic discursive conventions such as a realism based in religious fundamentalism and a West-tailored fantastic comedy. The narrator in the text, then, swings between extreme forms of rhetoric without having to take up the role of the judge on such a violence-charged event as Bhutto's political career. Suleri continues to contend that *Shame*'s ultimate undoing is the historical fact with which the novel has emboldened itself to flirt. The critic's message is simple: if the novelist has chosen to address a temporally immediate news event, he faces an immediate judgment within moral parameters.

The distance that the fictional narrative takes vis-à-vis a recent news event, then, determines the ethical valence of the narrative. So what exactly is the crime that the archetypal postcolonial writer, Rushdie, commits? Suleri specifies that *Shame* is incapable of addressing the issue of complicity, a complicity that the novel's narrative entertains "in the structure of a cultural judgment that takes the form of a muffled or a silenced voice" (177). The narrative violence imposed on the central female figure bespeaks such an ethical flaw:

The rawness of postcolonial narrative . . . of which *Shame* is exemplary, presents itself as a peculiarly resonant site for the reading of the erotic

structure of morality. In *Shame*, this conjunction is represented by the central female character, an allegorical figure who embodies both what Rushdie sees as the feminine discourse of shame and also its capacity to exceed the limits of censorship in order to articulate the indictment of a culture. With the text's characteristic swerve toward violence, this figure is in addition an imbecile, signifying an ethical inchoateness that is uncannily similar in tone to the sexual terror that marks the novel's disturbingly apocalyptic conclusion. "Realism," therefore, functions in the narrative as a trope for the punishability of discourse, of its curious ability to exude a fear of bodily harm. (180)

Another symptom of the critic's moral stiffness is her hastiness in wrapping up the case on the allegory in the novel. At one point, Suleri comments on the allegorical implication of the character Omar Khayyaam, who in the story is said to be conceived by three mothers. Suleri remarks that the detail of Omar's tripartite birth "warns the reader away from the obviousness of decoding, of falling into the simplicity of assuming that Omar Khayyaam, born out of a trinity of mothers, signifies that fresh arrival of the Pakistani citizen, born neither of Britain, nor of India, nor of Pakistan, which is still too new to be true. Thus allegory itself is subjected to an internal censor, constructing a symbolic structure that is somehow emptied of symbol" (180-81). Here the dynamic of allegorical disruption in the novel is relegated to an "internal censor," which Suleri further associates with the symptom of "the vocabulary of otherness," a discursive violence done to the other via a rhetoric of productivity. One would almost be taken aback by the critic's neglect of Rushdie's use of irony. As a matter of fact, Suleri does recognize Rushdie's "self-repeating irony." Such irony, however, does not conjure away for her the suspiciousness of the novel: "*Shame* is unable to address . . . the narrative's responsibility to the story it must tell . . . to represent how political

information gets transmitted once it has been let loose, as it were, from the decorum of oppression” (177).

Again and again, the critic directs our attention to the moral weakness of the novel and the wrongly placed emphasis on realism that manifests this very weakness. Suleri attempts to show that *Shame*’s problem lies primarily in its clumsy play with historical literalism and with a hit-and-run allegory. Intriguingly, the critic measures the postcolonial narrative’s propriety with a rather similar literalism applied to the author of the novel. She conceives of Pakistan as a sign for mutual betrayal between the nation and Rushdie: “its betrayal, to him, of the idea of a home, and his betrayal of it, in his need to have none of it” (177). After having read a good deal of allegorical significance into the novelist’s life story, the critic proceeds to suggest that fictional narrative is not only entitled but also obligated to effect ethical responsibility, all because of the novelist’s intimacy with his subject. But this is not all; the critic, while calling for an ethical sensibility, dismisses a formalistic overdetermination of historical meanings, be it tragic or comic, both of which she has identified in *Shame*. The result, then, is a confusing injunction as follows: “Is it really the business of narrative to confer tragedy on a historical event, or is Rushdie obliquely referring to his own desire to gothicize a structure already hopelessly lost in its own ornamentation? What filial anxieties is the writer himself manifesting, when he seeks to deny all dignity to a history that is indirectly his?” (183).

As the critic herself puts it elsewhere in the same essay, “to be too literal is to occupy the most tropological realm of all” (202). When she indiscreetly reads a biographical literalism (idiom of betrayal, filial anxieties) into the narrative, the otherwise explosive energy of the allegorical/figurative side of the novelistic form is inevitably marginalized; the novelist’s life story turns out to be the only buoy against which the critic navigates her reading.

Dismissive of immediacy and appreciative of time difference, Suleri's reading of *The Satanic Verses* affirms the critical thrust of the novel's anachronism, which allows Rushdie to "extend—with urgency and *fidelity*—his engagement with both cultural self-definition and Islamic historiography" (191; emphasis mine). Or, on the issue of complicity, which she thinks *Shame* fails to address *loyally*, Suleri argues that the theme of blasphemy in *The Satanic Verses* "assumes the intimacy of a novel mode of historical introspection," and "manifest[s] the *similitudes between the idioms of betrayal and loyalty that history has imposed upon a postcolonial world*" (192; emphasis mine).

The critic's ambivalent intentionality begins to emerge. *Shame*, to be sure, does address the question of complicity. The problem is that it has made a technical mistake. Suleri calls the kind of complicity manifest in *Shame* "the complicity of comedy and shame that the postcolonial narrative *must* experience" (178; emphasis mine). Obviously she has detected this complicity as a historical condition for postcoloniality; in fact, she even maintains that this writing of complicity finally pushes postcolonial writing away from the otherwise banal dichotomous colonizer/colonized paradigm—an important insight Suleri has been known for. Yet her diverse approaches to *Shame* and *The Satanic Verses* reveal nothing but her own obsession with the idiom of fidelity, which, I argue, is never a given in postcolonial reality. Furthermore, this absence of a given, along with the impossibility to take an elegant critical distance from a historical event, in effect brings into relief the overdetermination of postcoloniality.

Suleri's critical work has been meticulously scrutinized here primarily because it touches upon the anxiety that Rushdie critics experience as to how the postcolonial writer can represent history. Suleri, along with Brennan, recognizes the overdetermined condition of postcoloniality, yet the rhetoric of fidelity prevails in the

final analysis. What are airbrushed, then, are questions such as what may constitute the allegorical impulse in Rushdie's novelistic characters, and why or how this impulse may point to an analogous relationship between postcoloniality and writing. In the following section, I will start reading Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* while examining, by way of Benjamin, the epistemo-ontological significance of allegory.

### III. Allegory and Overdetermination: From Benjamin to Rushdie

The narrative of Rushdie's 1981 novel unfolds in the form of the personal memoir of the protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Together with one thousand other babies, Saleem is born on the midnight of August 15, 1947, the moment when India officially becomes independent. These prodigies later form a special community not only because of their shared origin but also because of the magical powers with which they are all endowed. Saleem, born at the precise moment of his nation's nativity, possesses the strongest power, telepathy, while his virtual rival Shiva, born at the same golden moment, turns into a formidable warrior. On his tenth birthday, Saleem establishes M.C.C. (Midnight Children's Conference) and assumes leadership in the group of five hundred and eighty-one remaining midnight's children.<sup>10</sup>

Allegorical interpretations of *Midnight's Children* have dominated Rushdie studies. Critics' foci vary. Sometimes the highlight is on the redemptive potential and failure of each class category represented by each character;<sup>11</sup> at other times the focus

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<sup>10</sup> That means that four hundred and twenty midnight's children did not make it to the founding of Midnight Children's Conference. The numeral 420 is not so much a random choice as an example of Rushdie's careful arrangement of signs all over his texts: "420 has been, since time immemorial, the numeral associated with fraud, deception and trickery" (*MC* 235). Not particularly important in *Midnight's Children*, this number will assume a more crucial position when it reappears in *The Satanic Verses*. I will return to the magic numbers in Rushdie's texts later.

<sup>11</sup> Uma Parameswaran praises the female character Padma, adult Saleem's discontented lover and audience, as a representative of collective consciousness and common people who make possible the writing of the individualistic artist, such as Saleem (44-45). Brennan has a similar class-sensitive argument.

is on the novel's display of various modes of historical consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Some critics pinpoint the specific allegorical technique that Rushdie deploys;<sup>13</sup> others read the novel as a metafictional allegory of the cosmopolitan immigrant writer's positioning vis-à-vis the subject matter of his writing.<sup>14</sup>

To be certain, *Midnight's Children* literally welcomes allegorical readings. The narrative teems with self-allegorization as follows: "I [Saleem] had been mysteriously handcuffed to history" (*MC* 3); "India, the new myth—a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by the two other mighty fantasies: money and God. I have been, in my life, the living proof of the fabulous nature of this collective dream . . ." (*MC* 130); "[midnight's children] can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom, which is now forever extinguished . . ." (*MC* 240).

Assuming a larger-than-life attempt at "chutnification of history" (*MC* 548), Saleem even develops a complicated nexus of relationships between history and himself, charted by the dynamic between the literal and the allegorical:

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<sup>12</sup> Aruna Srivastava's analysis of the novel draws on Nietzsche's three modes of consciousness (the unhistorical, the historical, and the superhistorical) as well as Foucault's notion of genealogy, especially the latter's concept of the body as an "inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration" (qtd. in Srivastava 70). In the final analysis, Srivastava turns to Gandhi and argues that only Mahatma's philosophical system promises a reconciliation of Foucault's and Nietzsche's chronotopic systems on the one side *and* the axe of myths and mythologies on the other side. David Price, basically following Srivastava's model, makes a more meticulous letter-for-letter parallel between Nietzsche's three modes of historical consciousness and the characters in *Midnight's Children*.

<sup>13</sup> Neil ten Kortenaar sees the novel as a literalization of common metaphors found in national discourse or official historical accounts ("Allegory"). Jean M. Kane reads the narrative as an act of literalization of the metaphor of the Indian body politic.

<sup>14</sup> As argued earlier, both Brennan and Suleri see Rushdie's writing as a metafiction of the production of third-world novels, and see the writer figure as an accomplice in the failed enterprise of the "national longing for form." On the other hand, Vijay Mishra applies Lyotard's notion of *differend* in her configuration of postcoloniality as a quintessential politics of the diaspora. Similarly, Syed Manzurul Islam, also drawing on the concept of *differend*, reads the faulty representation of history in *Midnight's Children* as an immigrant writer's effort to come to terms with an inaccessible past, just as the Jews with the Holocaust. Also see Jean Kane; Nasser Hussain.

How, in what terms, may the career of a single individual be said to impinge on the fate of a nation? I must answer in adverbs and hyphens: I was linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our (admirably modern) scientists might term “modes of connection” composed of “dualistically-combined configurations” of the two pairs of opposed adverbs given above. This is why hyphens are necessary: actively-literally, passively-metaphorically, actively-metaphorically and passively-literally, I was inextricably entwined with my world.

. . . By the combination of “active” and “literal” I mean, of course, all actions of mine which directly—*literally*—affected, or altered the course of, seminal historical events . . . . The union of “passive” and “metaphorical” encompasses all socio-political trends and events which, merely by existing, affected me metaphorically—for example, . . . the unavoidable connection between the infant state’s attempts at rushing towards full-sized adulthood and my own early, explosive efforts at growth . . . [these ellipsis points in the original] Next, “passive” and “literal,” when hyphenated, cover all moments at which national events had a direct bearing upon the lives of myself and my family . . . . And finally there is the “mode” of the “active-metaphorical,” which groups together those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history. (*MC* 285-86; emphasis in the original)



Saleem, on the surface, is an individual fully aware of putative postmodernist epistemological modes and artistic strategies.<sup>15</sup> He articulates explicitly in his personal accounts things like the fragmentation of historical discourse, the unreliability of grand narratives, and the faultiness of the narrator's memory. In addition, metafictional pauses during his storytelling are not uncommon. Yet, at the same time, he is constantly compelled to allegorize his connection with his world. How, then, should we decode such a combination? To what extent can we identify this allegorical impulse, in particular, as a symptom of the postcolonial condition?

Rushdie himself once stipulated that, in *Midnight's Children*, he did not intend to write a book of conventional allegory. He consciously resisted the idea of writing a book in the vein of "Indian allegorical symbolic model," that is, "an assumption that every story is really another story which you haven't quite told, and what you have to do is to translate the story that you have told into the story that you haven't told" (*"Midnight's"* 4, 3). Instead, Rushdie said that he was more interested in creating something in line with *leitmotif*: "the *leitmotif*, which is basically the idea of Walter Benjamin, is that you use as recurring things in the plot incidents or objects or phrases which in themselves have no meaning or no particular meaning but which form a kind of non-rational network of connections in the book." For Rushdie, the meaning of the *leitmotif* is "the sum total of the incidents in which it occurs," and the *leitmotif* works as "it accumulates meaning the more it is used" (3).

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<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, Rushdie's characters would often show an insider knowledge of signature postcolonial tropes. For example, here is a passage from *The Satanic Verses*, describing the two protagonists' fall from an exploded plane: "mingling with the remnants of the plane, equally fragmented, equally absurd, there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*" (SV 4). This passage finds a striking similarity in Rushdie prose work: "*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure" (IH 394).

As a matter of fact, *leitmotif* is never a Benjaminian term.<sup>16</sup> He does foreground fragmentation as central to the allegorical mode of expression, but Benjamin has never explicitly developed any concept around *leitmotif*.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, what Rushdie describes as the “non-rational network of connections” indeed converges with Benjamin’s allegory. Benjamin’s allegory, first of all, sheds light on the valence of reading history *not* temporally but optically, as he sees the former approach bordering on Eurocentric historicism. Secondly, Benjamin’s allegorical reading of modernity, as mentioned above, opens up the possibility of reading the philosophy of history out of a literary mode of expression. My main argument has been that both Benjamin’s and Rushdie’s allegories contribute to the philosophization of their respective historical moments. In what follows, I would like to zoom in on Benjamin’s theory of allegory and propose to place allegory in a more central position in his conception of historical cognition. I intend to link and compare the overdetermination of modernity with that of postcoloniality by showing the role that allegory plays in naming this overdetermination.

Benjamin’s configuration of allegory can be divided into two stages or two related types. One derives from his study of the *Trauerspiel* or the German Baroque mourning-play in his monograph *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, which he

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Professors Susan Buck-Morss and Geoffrey Waite of Cornell University for confirming this statement.

<sup>17</sup> Critic Todd Kuchta, however, has taken Rushdie’s remark at face value and applied Benjamin’s allegory to redress what he considers as the inadequacy of other allegorical interpretations of *Midnight’s Children*—that is, their failure to account for Rushdie’s subversion of conventional narrative structure. Kuchta demonstrates an energetic reading of the prevalent image of the finger in the novel, seeing the finger as a crucial allegorical object which draws a connection between postcolonial Indian authoritarian government (during Indira Gandhi’s rule, in particular) and the British colonial dominance. Yet Kuchta’s main argument is predicated on a misreading. In addition, the fragmentary structure of narrative, which Kuchta champions and claims to be the single outstanding characteristic in Benjamin and Rushdie, is anything but new or unconventional to postmodernism- and postcolonialism-savvy readers. One can even argue that “fragmentation” has become such a loose umbrella term for a wide range of cultural phenomena and artistic expressions that it loses critical valence if no distinction is made between, say, postmodern kitsch and a genuine political critique.

finished in 1925 for his *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Frankfurt. The other type arises from his persistent study of Charles Baudelaire, which roughly started around 1927 and continued until before his death in 1940.<sup>18</sup> It is not my intent to go into an elaborate comparison of these two Benjaminian allegories. I also do not propose that his Baroque and modern allegories occupy two separate cells in his system—quite the opposite, they in effect inform each other vibrantly. Suffice it to say that an awareness of the divergence and convergence of the two allegories (especially the historical conditions that animate them respectively) is requisite because otherwise, Benjaminian terms would only serve as convenient tools for critics to comment on any random situation while the critical concept in question (in this case, allegory) remains unproblematicized. As argued earlier (note 18), it is not enough to celebrate a postcolonial work simply because it valorizes fragmentation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Benjamin's Baudelaire study includes fragmentary notes which constitute a large portion of *Arcades Project*, where Konvolut J is entirely devoted to Baudelaire while many other Konvoluts deal with motifs related to Baudelaire, such as the *flâneur*, the prostitute, boredom and eternal recurrence, ruin of Paris; essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"; essay "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"; fragmentary notes collected as "Central Park"; and essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." For a detailed description of the chronological and thematic relationship between these works by Benjamin, see Susan Buck-Morss 48-50, 205-206.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Buck-Morss thinks that Baroque allegory's political weakness lies in its risk of becoming myth, something that Benjamin actually intends to debunk (175). In addition, Baroque and modern allegories differ mainly in the historical conditions they each respond to. For instance, Baroque physiognomy of the "history" of nature as debased and petrified—demonstrated in a flamboyant display of emblematics such as the human skull and in a cult of ruins—names a desperate response to a period of decline (Benjamin, *Origin* 167-89, 226-35). Baudelairean allegory, if no less a response to the debasement of nature, responds primarily to a world which contains allegorical objects of its own, namely, the capitalist world. In Benjamin's own words: "The devaluation of the world of objects in allegory is outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity" ("Central" 34). Furthermore, Baroque allegory and modern allegory differ in the degree of political critique each of them delivers. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, modern allegory, for Benjamin, inscribes a destructive violence that comes to tear off the organic appearance of things, to deprive things of their aura, or to demolish the mythical façade of the world of objects ("Central" 35, 41; or *Arcades* J22,5, J55a,3, J57,3) [references to *The Arcades Project* cite the original letter and numeral codes that Benjamin designed for his notes]. See Buck-Morss 170-90.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to think of Benjamin's modern allegory without seeing traces of Baroque allegory that he attributes to the *Trauerspiel*. For example, one major thrust of Benjamin's allegory is the configuration of it as an experience, a mode of expression, a historical gaze, a cultural dominant, and a critique all together. This feature is shared by Baroque and modern allegories. Or, the potential of political critique in Benjamin's allegory derives from a strong optical basis. It is the

Numerous critics have addressed, respectively, the Benjaminian allegory and Benjaminian theory of history, the latter crystallized in what Benjamin calls the “dialectical image.” Yet these two concepts are usually treated separately. Here I would like to argue that allegory in effect bears a closer affinity to the dialectical image than most critics have noted.

Benjamin configures the dialectical image as both an objective event of happening and a subjective event of reading. The dialectical image comes to represent the constellation of a historicity at the meeting point of the present and the past. On the other hand, it requires the historical subject to recognize the image: “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again”; “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop” (“Theses” 255, 262); “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (*Arcades* N2a,3).<sup>20</sup>

Some leading scholars categorically stipulate that the Benjaminian allegory is non-dialectical.<sup>21</sup> While Benjamin’s occasional rhetorical obscurity does leave room

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counter-gaze of the image (be it the Baroque cult of the human skull or the prostitute figure in Baudelaire) that materializes what Benjamin terms the “allegorical intention.”

<sup>20</sup> The dialectical image, no doubt, is one of the most discussed Benjaminian notions. For the potential of the dialectical image to offer a theory of language as “the opening of the possibility of relation *in time*,” see Christopher Fynsk. For the dialectical image’s paradoxical nature of being both intuitive and non-intuitive, see Susan Buck-Morss 216-21. For the dialectical image as an act of reading connections between things, persons, and historical eras, see Michael Jennings 114-20.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Bainard Cowan; Elissa Marder; and Christine Buci-Glucksmann. Cowan’s argument would make sense only when applied to Benjaminian Baroque allegory, for Cowan reads Benjamin as suggesting that the world of the Baroque *Trauerspiel* lacks a “motivation”; hence the pervasive melancholia (118). Marder reads Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire’s sense of history as “cliché,” which, originally denoting the mechanical reproduction of letters on a page, means a ghostly

for multiple meanings, to completely deprive the Benjaminian allegory of its dialectical thrust, I claim, is misleading. For even Baroque allegory, which lacks the kind of disruptive force that tellingly characterizes modern allegory, proceeds dialectically for Benjamin. In his *Trauerspiel* monograph, Benjamin emphatically underscores the presence of a dialectical dynamic in allegory and the absence of one in the symbol:

The measure of time for the experience of the symbol is the mystical instant in which the symbol assumes the meaning into its hidden and, if one might say so, wooded interior. On the other hand, allegory is not free from a corresponding dialectic, and the contemplative calm with which it immerses itself into the depths which separate visual being from meaning, has none of the disinterested self-sufficiency which is present in the apparently related intention of the sign. *The violence of the dialectic movement* within these allegorical depths must become clearer in the study of the form of the *Trauerspiel* than anywhere else. (*Origin* 165-66; emphasis mine)

In “Central Park,” Benjamin sometimes describes allegory and the dialectical image in very similar terms: “Tearing things out of the context of their usual interrelations—which is quite normal where commodities are being exhibited—is a procedure very characteristic of Baudelaire. It is related to the destruction of the organic interrelations in the allegoric intention” (41); “The dialectical image is one flashing up momentarily. It is thus, as an image flashing up in the *now* of its

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repeated production of the same images. Marder’s linking this sense of history and Barthes’s undialectical understanding of photography is brilliant, but she ignores the function of the Benjaminian allegory as an ethico-political critique. Furthermore, Buci-Glucksmann’s understanding of Benjamin’s dialectical image (“dialectics at a standstill”) to be “anti-dialectical” is an unfortunate misreading, for Benjamin does not mean to divest this “still” dialectics of its dialectical thrust outright. As a matter of fact, Benjamin considers his “dialectical image” as a mutual critique between different times (the present and the past, for instance). It is this critique that gives the image its disialectical drive.

recognisability, that the past, in this case that of Baudelaire, can be captured” (49; emphasis in the original). As mentioned in the last chapter, Susan Buck-Morss carefully sets up an axial system to explain Benjamin’s dialectical image, emphasizing that, for Benjamin, these axial fields represent irreconcilable oppositions. With “commodity” sitting in the middle as the central trope for the dialectical image of modernity, the opposing axial fields, respectively, are: “natural history: fossil (trace)” on the upper left side; “historical nature: ruin (allegory)” on the upper right side; “mythic history: fetish (phantasmagoria)” on the lower left side; and “mythic nature: wish image (symbol)” on the lower right side (211).

Benjamin does deploy these terms in his different ramifications of capitalist modernity—for example, the nineteenth-century shopping arcades, world exhibitions, and fashion as the culmination of capitalist fetishism in a phantasmagoric form; new technology (iron, glass) articulated in architecture as wish-fulfilling images; the figures of the collector and the detective as a human epitome of trace and the transitoriness of nature; and the *flâneur*, the prostitute, and the lesbian as quintessential modern allegorists. Nevertheless, the more distinctions are made between these terms, the more they come to resemble one another. In fact, the more these terms are applied, the more it seems that Benjamin entrusts allegory with a governing status—that is, whatever quality can be detected in other philosophemes of his is already an allegorical quality. Especially in Benjamin’s Baudelaire studies, where he extends the notion of allegory and associates it tightly with modern commodity, allegory emerges as a generic notion denoting anything from “the devaluation of the world of objects” (“Central” 34) to “the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (“Paris, Capital” 162), from the “destruction of the organic and living” to the “decline of the aura” (“Central” 41), and from the prostitute as commodity to writing as prostitution (40, 46). We can have a

glimpse of the subordination of other philosophemes under allegory in the essay “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” where Benjamin gathers almost all the aspects of the dialectical image (dream image, fetish, allegory) into one paragraph:

Modernity is a main accent in [Baudelaire’s] poetry. He shatters the ideal as spleen (*Spleen et Idéal*). But it is precisely modernity that is always quoting primeval history. This happens here through the ambiguity attending the social relationships and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopian and the dialectic image therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one. (“Paris, Capital” 157)

Note the preeminent part that allegory plays in Benjamin’s summary of modernity here. Modernity quoting primeval history, arcades (along with the quintessential component in the scene of arcades, the *flâneur*), the prostitute figure—all these moments and figures come to illuminate our cognition of modernity, Benjamin argues, through Baudelaire’s genius, which is “an allegorical genius” (156). As a matter of fact, Buck-Morss herself, while stipulating the separateness of the four axial fields that constitute the dialectical image, repeatedly emphasizes the affinity of Benjamin’s theorization of modernity, especially in the *Arcades Project*, with Baroque emblematics:

The *Passagen-Werk*’s [*Arcades Project*’s] pictorial representations of ideas are undeniably modeled after those emblem books of the seventeenth century, which had widespread appeal as perhaps the first genre of mass publication. The gambler and the *flâneur* in the Arcades

project personify the empty time of modernity; the whore is an image of the commodity form; decorative mirrors and bourgeois interiors are emblematic of bourgeois subjectivism; dust and wax figures are signs of history's motionlessness; mechanical dolls are emblematic of workers' existence under industrialism; the store cashier is perceived "as living image, as allegory of the cashbox." (228)<sup>22</sup>

All the above elaboration is not meant to suggest that allegory, for Benjamin, is tantamount to the dialectical image. My governing point is to identify the virtual predominance of allegory among all the Benjaminian philosophemes. I argue that, while all these philosophemes are primarily imagist—which by itself is already an insightful innovation on Benjamin's part—allegory stands out in that it poses a critique of the phenomenon from which the allegorical object arises. As critic Terry Eagleton maintains, for Benjamin, "If there is a route beyond reification, it is through and not around it" (20). Allegory has the potential to cut across the history that awaits redemption in that allegory is, first and foremost, an expression of the overdetermination of history.

Benjamin's rendition of modern allegory singularly seeks a dialogue with Baudelairean modernity. Why, then, is Benjamin relevant to Rushdie? For one thing, Benjamin's allegory provides an entry into the double gaze of historical cognition: the allegorical object (such as the prostitute), which at first sight epitomizes a historical event or phenomenon (such as mass production), can turn the gaze around and expose the petrification of all the phantasmagoria surrounding the historical phenomenon.<sup>23</sup> Rushdie's historical cognition, I propose, is marked by a similar doubleness. Moreover,

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<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Buck-Morss also distinguishes dialectical images from allegorical images in terms of the former's "objective" meaning and the latter's "subjective" character (241).

<sup>23</sup> "Women in Baudelaire: the most precious spoils in the 'Triumph of Allegory'—Life, which means Death. This quality is most unqualifiedly characterised by the whore" ("Central" 39; *Arcades* J60,5).



Benjamin's allegory promises a way to look at the dynamic between the visual image and the word in historical understanding. In Konvolut N in the *Arcades Project*, where Benjamin elaborates his imagist reading of history (his configuration of the relationship between "what-has-been" and "the now" as imagist-dialectical instead of historicist-temporal), he intriguingly suggests that the place where one encounters dialectical images is nothing other than language (N2a,3).

Critic Christopher Fynsk has suggested considering the "recognition" of the dialectical image as an agreement taking place in the structure of speech:

The possibility of speaking/acting in the present—the possibility of speaking truth in the present, of speaking the truth of the present—comes out of the past. To begin to speak truly in the authentic historical time of the present is to realize a contract with the past to which one has necessarily already agreed. The contract is the condition of speech: to "recognize" the contract is to *have assumed* it; otherwise there can be no true act of recognition. With the dialectical image, to speak is to have recognized the past in its recognizability, to have recognized the past's *binding* gift. Every time we speak (truly) we have contracted with the past. (123-24; emphasis in the original)

The harmonious pact between the present and the past that Fynsk describes here comes across as linear and historicist and henceforth non-Benjaminian—as I understand it, the "recognition" of the dialectical image involves a mutual critique between the present and the past. Yet I agree with Fynsk and another major Benjamin critic, Michael Jennings, that the dialectical image should be understood as a reading or a critique. As for how Benjamin's "imagist" language can be materialized in the act of recognizing the dialectical image, I propose that textual allegory plays an effective part here in that it involves a dialogic interaction between the image and the word. If

this is the case, Benjamin's proposition about encountering dialectical images in language only reinforces the structural affinity between the dialectical image and allegory.

The historical critique—the recognition of the dialectical image—is the function of modern allegory for Benjamin. In Rushdie, allegorical impulse too emerges as a commentary on the historical moment which conditions this impulse. Nevertheless, while for Benjamin the political purchase of allegory depends heavily on the “measure of time” that sets apart the present and the past (modernity and primeval history) and on the mutual critique between the two timeframes, for Rushdie's postcolonial subjects, the overdetermination of the historical condition is such that there is no mediation of time in their representation of history. Every event demands an immediate recognition and an immediate designation of meanings.

#### **IV. Sparing the Finger: *Midnight's Children***

If Saleem Sinai is made to see himself as “the mirror of [India]” (*MC* 143), the repository of all the allegorical intention is stored in the *event*—the event of a nation's decolonization epitomized in a child's birth. The date, August 15, 1947, serves as a differential sign that separates the present from the past. The emphasis on an ostensibly neutral date, however, undermines the intentionality for newness on the part of the postcolonial subject.

The striving for newness and for difference is the major storyline of postcolonial nation-building. As India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru articulates in his Independence speech, cited by Saleem: “At the stroke of the midnight's hour, while the world sleeps, India awakens to life and freedom”; “A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new; when an age ends; and when the soul of a nation long suppressed finds

utterance . . .” (*MC* 134). What Saleem does not cite is the “striving” part in Nehru’s speech: “[T]he past is over and it is the future that beckons to us now. That future is not one of ease or resting but of incessant striving so that we may fulfil the pledges we have so often taken and the one we shall take today. . . . And so we have to labour and to work, and work hard, to give reality to our dreams.”

In the novel, this striving for difference soon turns into a struggle over authenticity, embodied in the rivalry between Saleem Sinai and the real son of the Sinais, Shiva, over their birth certificates—that is, metaphorically speaking. Saleem’s need to be different returns to haunt him repeatedly in the form of discovering his own otherness. The nation that he mirrors, too, repeatedly fails to live up to the promise of difference.

My argument is that not only does Rushdie mean to critique the obsession with difference in postcolonial national discourse, his critique translates into the material aspect of the textuality. Throughout the novel, sameness recurs in all areas of plot details: repetition of the same images, recapitulation of “morals” of previous events, similitudes in characters, and so on. While critics by far have exhausted readings of the “conspicuous” allegorical aspects of the novel (that is, those allegorical elements whose interpretations are primarily anticipated and provided by the narrator-protagonist), not many critics have elaborated on the element of sameness in the novel. Nor have critics been willing to look at those seemingly meaningless moments of image accumulation. Recurring images, at first sight, come across as a rejection of singularity and a tendency towards closed-ness of historical perception. Moreover, the dazzling array of recurrent images in *Midnight’s Children* strikes an impression of a fatigued history—and a fatigued history, to some extent, implies a secondary history. Yet I will argue that the instances of sameness in the narrative of *Midnight’s Children*, along with the co-presence of the meaningful and the meaningless, in effect point to a

profane illumination that proceeds by the bad side of history. The image of the finger serves as a pointed example.

The image of the finger begins its metaphoric journey with a painting of young Walter Raleigh hanging on the “sky-blue wall” of baby Saleem’s room. Critic Neil ten Kortenaar has identified the painting in question as *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, painted in 1870 by Sir John Everett Millais (see “Ekphrasis”). In this painting, young Raleigh and another boy sit at the foot of an old seasoned fisherman, listening to accounts of the latter’s adventures abroad. The fisherman points his right index finger to the sky while he relates enchanting stories. As adult Saleem recalls, from the very beginning his destiny is tied with the finger:

In a picture hanging on a bedroom wall, I sat beside Walter Raleigh and followed a fisherman’s pointing finger with my eyes; eyes straining at the horizon, beyond which lay—what?—my future, perhaps; my special doom, of which I was aware from the beginning . . . because the finger pointed . . . across a brief expanse of sky-blue wall, driving my eyes towards another frame, in which my inescapable destiny hung, forever fixed under glass: here was a jumbo-sized baby-snap with its prophetic captions, and here, beside it, a letter on high-quality vellum, embossed with the seal of state—the lions of Sarnath stood above the dharma-chakra on the Prime Minister missive, which arrive . . . one week after my photograph appeared on the front page of the *Times of India*.

Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: “Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth!” (*MC* 142-43)

This picture becomes disturbing because, as a child, Saleem is literally modeled on an English boy. His mother and ayah would dress him up in “the attire of the English milords”—he is so stunningly “*chweet*” that one time a neighbor has to exclaim: “It’s like he’s just stepped out of the *picture!*” (142; emphasis in the original). Moreover, the fisherman’s pointing finger in the Raleigh painting serves as a link between Saleem and the city of Bombay: “because if one followed [the finger] even further, it led one out through the window, down the two-storey hillock, across Warden Road, beyond Breach Candy Pools, and out to another sea which was not the sea in the picture; a sea on which the sails of Koli dhows glowed scarlet in the setting sun . . . an accusing finger, then, which obliged us to look at the city’s dispossessed” (MC 143-44; ellipsis in the original).<sup>24</sup>

There is yet another primitive association with the fisherman’s finger. Saleem’s grandfather Aadam Aziz as a young man is befriended with the boatman and storyteller, Tai, in his Kashmiri hometown: “the Boy Aadam, my grand-father-to-be, fell in love with the boatman Tai precisely because of the endless verbiage which made others think him cracked. It was magical talk . . .” (MC 10). This friendship breaks off when Tai resentfully rejects the scientific ways of life that the German-trained Aziz has brought back from abroad. Since then, Tai has refused to clean

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<sup>24</sup> Ten Kortenaar employs the technique of ekphrasis (verbal representation of a visual representation) and suggests that Rushdie, with the triptych formed by the Raleigh painting, the Prime Minister’s letter, and the window, instead of trying to rewrite the history implied in Millais’s painting, is mainly drawing attention to the nature of storytelling done by both the canvas and the text, by both the imperialist and the postcolonial (“Ekphrasis” 242). For Ten Kortenaar, it does not matter very much that the Sinais apparently have misread the Raleigh painting (in the sense that the parents want to put Saleem in the painting by dressing him up Elizabethan style, and that Saleem himself literally follows the direction of the pointing finger to find an uncanny Bombay). What matters, Ten Kortenaar argues, is that such mimicry and misunderstanding disturb the colonial pedagogy by “a reading that makes nonsense of obedience” (258). Kuchta, on the other hand, reads the Raleigh painting more as an indication of India’s status of pseudo-independence: “The finger serves as an allegorical object whose meaning evolves within the dialectic of Saleem’s present memory of the past. Initially a celebration of Saleem’s status as midnight’s child and thus of India’s independence, it implicitly reminds Saleem of his homeland’s colonization and its infusion by European domination and culture, and indicates India’s inability to sustain its poor. The finger thus undermines the notion of India’s complete independence from imperialism and from the problems associated with imperial rule” (217).

himself, and his body odors turn into “a gesture of unchangingness in defiance of the invasion of the doctori-attaché from Heidelberg” (*MC* 25-26). Tai’s admonishing finger is only implicit, yet the way in which the human body becomes the central site of allegorization throughout Saleem’s narrative, starts right here.

As Saleem’s recollection unfolds, the image of the finger continues to dominate the narrative. When he is a boy, one day Saleem’s middle finger is broken off by school bullies at a school function. The adult Saleem categorizes this incident in the “active-metaphorical” mode, which he defines as “those occasions on which things done by or to me were mirrored in the macrocosm of public affairs, and my private existence was shown to be symbolically at one with history” (*MC* 286). The coding works as follows: “when I was detached from my fingertip and blood (neither Alpha nor Omega) rushed out in fountains, a similar thing happened to history, and all sorts of everywhichting began pouring out all over us . . .” (*MC* 286). Here Saleem is referring to the political turmoil in the wake of the 1957 general elections when the ruling party, All-India Congress, wins the election only by a small margin, losing a significant number of votes to emergent Communists. At the same time, the future of the state of Bombay is under heated debates generated by language communalism (*MC* 265-68).

What is noteworthy is the extent to which Saleem has come to attribute his life to the network of cultural coding—that is, the inevitability of the active-passive, literal-metaphorical connections. The fisherman’s finger in the Raleigh painting, indeed, emerges as the origin and master signifier in the system of coding. Yet, with a narrative haunted by the same finger image, an uncanny sense is provoked as the narrator seems to constantly meander between the conscious and the unconscious, between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and between the meaningful and the meaningless. As the demand of the master signifier looms large, the finger image, in

some cases, comes to disturb the master signifier not so much by a conscious play as by unconscious slippages. That is, the excessive use of the finger signifier overflows the limit of its coding pedagogy and leads to unexpected realms of historical cognition. This is where I depart from critics like Ten Kortenaar, who dismiss the proliferation of the same image as non-empowering: “The writer of a narrative, looking back in search of origins and signs, will always find signs ready to be interpreted. But if everything can be a sign, how can anything be said to have significance?” (“Ekphrasis” 247). I propose that the accumulation of the same image tellingly names a distinctive historical impulse constitutive of the postcolonial experience.

After an anti-Partition cultural leader is murdered by Muslim nationalists prior to Partition, a British brigadier in his car passes by a crowd of locals who are playing betel spitting. When the army commander’s car knocks over the spittoon on the street, “[a] dark red fluid with clots in it like blood congeals like a red hand in the dust of the street and points accusingly at the retreating power of the Raj” (*MC* 45). Before Saleem’s birth, the business of his Muslim father, Ahmed Sinai, is threatened by local anti-Muslim gangsters: “the cloud of the disaster (which is also a relief) rises and gathers like a ball in the discoloured morning sky. See how . . . it is pointing, good lord, like a finger, pointing down at the Muslim muhalla near Chandni Chowk!” (*MC* 82). In year 1948, racial tensions are responsible for many massacres: “They—we—should have known something bad would happen. That January, Chowpatty Beach, and Juhu and Trombay, too, were littered with the ominous corpses of dead pomfret, which floated, without the ghost of an explanation, belly-side-up, like scaly fingers in to shore” (*MC* 159). Around the same time, Ahmed’s assets are all frozen by the government, and the “literal” impact on him is the freezing of his maleness: every night his wife could feel his shiver “as the icy fingers of rage and powerlessness spread towards from his loins” (*MC* 158).

At times, these images take up involuntary correspondences. For example, adult Saleem describes that his lover and audience, Padma, would from time to time “jab[] a contemptuous index finger in the direction of [his] admittedly non-functional loins; a long, thick digit, rigid with jealousy, which unfortunately served only to remind [him] of another, long-lost finger . . .” (*MC* 142; ellipsis in the original). The reference of the “long-lost finger” is curious. Right after this interruption by his lover, Saleem resumes his memoir-writing and proceeds to describe the Raleigh painting in his childhood room, along with the two other frames related to the painting. This chapter, furthermore, is entitled “The Fisherman’s Pointing Finger.”

As the same image occurs repeatedly, the desire to allegorize only intensifies on the narrator’s part. For example, when Saleem’s mother, Amina, reads that a Bombay newspaper is offering an award to the mother who gives birth to a baby at the exact instant of the state’s birth, “Amina’s finger, jabbing triumphantly at the page, punctuated the utter certainty of her voice. . . . Amina announced. ‘That’s going to be me’” (*MC* 113). When Saleem discovers the mysterious phone calls his mother receives from her ex-husband, the same image continues to haunt his narration: “Electricity in the air. Heat, buzzing like bees. A mantle, hanging somewhere in the sky, waiting to fall gently around my shoulders . . . somewhere, a finger reaches towards a dial; a dial whirs around and around, electrical pulses dart along cable, seven, zero, five, six, one. The telephone rings” (*MC* 189; ellipsis in the original).

The geography and gymnastics teacher in Saleem’s primary school, Emil Zagallo, always dismissing the children as “jungle-Indians, bead-lovers,” also contributes to young Saleem’s experience with violence. Zagallo’s Goanese mother being abandoned by a British decamped shipping agent, Zagallo “was not only an ‘Anglo’ but probably a bastard as well.” However, he likes to affect a Latin accent and claims himself to be Peruvian. His misplaced racist furor is revealed, imaginably, via a



finger: “[Zagallo] hung a print of a stern, sweaty soldier in a pointy tin hat and metal pantaloons above his blackboard and had a way of stabbing a finger at it in times of stress and shouting, ‘You see heem, you savages? Thees man eez civilization! You show heem respect: he’s got a *sword!*’” (*MC* 275; emphasis in the original). The list of these invocations of the finger can go on. For example, Saleem’s younger days are accompanied by “the rosary-fingering presence of Mary Pereira [the woman who swabbed Saleem with Shiva at their birth]” (*MC* 304). At the high time of Indo-Pakistani conflicts, Saleem’s Muslim family move to Pakistan, and one lingering memory of that country for Saleem is “the mosque’s long pointing finger” (*MC* 394). When air raids during the Indo-Pakistani war in 1965 kill most of Saleem’s family members, the image of the finger, uncannily, serves its purpose one more time as a ghostly object: “the fingers of the explosion reaching down down to the bottom of an almirah . . .” (*MC* 409). During the time when Indira Gandhi (referred to as “the Widow” in the text) imposes a State of Emergency (years 1975-1977 in real history), Saleem is captured and castrated at the “Widow’s Hostel” in Benares. Critic Todd Kuchta rightly suggests that Saleem’s chopped finger at age eleven figures and foreshadows his later castration by the Widow, and that all these images of castration (literal and metaphorical) point to “the impeded maturation of Indian politics” (219).

In Kuchta’s (mis-)application of Benjamin to Rushdie (see note 18), Kuchta in effect insightfully suggests that not every “*leitmotif* object” in Rushdie’s novel has an inherent meaning. Yet Kuchta himself cannot help but turn to the conventional allegorical mode of interpretation by selecting only a handful of “useful” images of the finger from the novel. Moreover, Kuchta’s reading, in the final analysis, fixes the reading of *Midnight’s Children* at one historical pivotal point: “The allegorical structure of *Midnight’s Children* demands that we read Indian national history through the perspective of Indira Gandhi’s Emergency regime and thereby attempt to ‘attain to

a conception of history' that subverts 'the "state of emergency" in which we live"' (221). What is lacking in Kuchta's well-intended perspective, however, is an attention to those "insignificant" moments of coding in the novel. I will return to this at the end of this chapter.

## V. How the Postcolonials Survive Numbers: *The Satanic Verses*

In *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie once again demonstrates how postcoloniality is an overdetermined inscription—a motif forcefully figured in the haunting sameness in the textual materiality and in the constant interruption of the ethos of newness.

*The Satanic Verses* opens with a grave historical inquiry concerning the ideology of newness: "How does newness come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made? How does it survive, extreme and dangerous as it is? What compromises, what deals, what betrayals of its secret nature must it make to stave off the wrecking crew, the exterminating angel, the guillotine? Is birth always a fall? Do angels have wings? Can men fly?" (SV 8). This passage not only reminds one of the promises and failures of newness in *Midnight's Children*, but also sets the tone for *The Satanic Verses*. Historical and cultural cognition in the postcolonial condition continues to pivot around the obsession with newness, with the striving for difference.

The two protagonists, Indian-born Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, at some point of their lives both believe that they shall find newness in Britain. Gibreel, before relocating incognito in London, makes his way to super-stardom in India best known for his portrayals of deities in a movie genre called "theologicals" (SV 157). Saladin, son of a snobbish capitalist, against whom he has long held grudges, receives his education in Britain upon his father's insistence and later chooses to embrace his adopted country in all loyalty. In contrast to Gibreel, whose career and entire existence

are marked by a visual relationship with gods (his filmic embodiments of gods and, later, his dreams of being the archangel), Saladin is a talented voice mimicker acclaimed for a television show called *Aliens*. The fates of the two begin to intertwine when the plane they take from Bombay to London (Saladin on his way back to London after a disappointing hometown visit, and Gibreel on a self-exile trip) is hijacked and later exploded in the air. Both surviving the crash, each after his fall gradually becomes aware of another being present inside him: being the archangel and/or being the devil, with the two beings interchangeable with each other. The journey towards newness, thus, is interrupted by postlapsarian twists and turns.

Their search for newness is echoed in many other episodes in the novel. Rosa Diamond, the old English lady who rescues Gibreel after his fall, is once married to an Anglo-Argentine gentleman during the Empire's declining years. Her sole reason for moving to that "immensity" called Argentina is "to be *new*" (SV 145; emphasis in the original). A more political twist to the idiom of newness is related to Margaret Thatcher's hegemonic rule:

What she wants . . . is literally to invent a whole goddamn new middle class in this country. Get rid of the old wooly incompetent buggers from fucking Surrey and Hampshire, and bring in the new. People without background, without history. Hungry people. People who really *want*, and who know that with her, they can bloody well *get*. Nobody's ever tried to replace a whole fucking *class* before, and the amazing thing is she might just do it if they don't get her first. (SV 270; emphasis in the original)

Or, the most radical attempt to break from oldness is to eliminate history or time outright—an idea tapped by the nameless Imam: "History is the blood-wine that must no longer be drunk. History the intoxicant, the creation and possession of the Devil, of

the great Shaitan, the greatest of the lies—progress, science, rights—against which the Imam has set his face” (SV 210).

Nevertheless, the striving for newness, for difference, and for a radical break from the past, is constantly depressed and rendered impossible by the interpolation of repetitions or similitudes. And all this impossibility of difference has to do with the postlapsarian history. It is after the fall, literally and metaphorically, that the first symptom of sameness emerges—between Gibreel and Saladin, between the angel and the devil, between the human and the superhuman, and between the end of one history (Gibreel and Saladin’s fall) and the inception of another one. As the narrator spells it out, “Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha, condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall, did not become aware of the moment at which the processes of their transmutation began” (SV 5).

Or, the authority of the original newness is constantly short-circuited by the multiple intrusions of others into the origin, including temporal interferences. Take, for instance, the episodes of dreams in the novel. The governing storyline, that of the modern Gibreel and Saladin, is realistically situated in the Thatcherite Britain. Yet, the most controversial episodes in the novel, those allusive to the founding prophet of Islam, unfold in the twilight zone between (the rewriting of) history and the dream world of Gibreel, himself living in the twilight zone between the literal archangel, Gibreel’s literal embodiment of the angel, and the dreaming of his embodiment of the angel. Temporal interpenetration shows how the subject lives through the overdetermined postcoloniality with an intimacy with the sense of time. Time, in other words, is not just an abstract concept; time in effect has a solid materiality.

Another major symptom of sameness is detected in the scene of naming. Gibreel bears the name of the archangel, and his full name Gibreel Farishta literally means “Gabriel the angel.” His original name Ismail Najmuddin furthers the excess of

meaning: “Ismail after the child involved in the sacrifice of Ibrahim, and Najmuddin, *star of the faith*” (SV 17; emphasis in the original). The narrator’s comment here poses an uncanny prophecy: “he’d given up quite a name when he took the angel’s” (SV 17).<sup>25</sup>

The redundancy of signification in Gibreel’s name, later, is to collide with a rebellion against precise referencing occasioned by his “angelicdevilish” nature. This dubious duality of his has a literal origin, though, for his mother used to call him by the name of the devil: “his loving mother . . . has a different name for him, Shaitan, she calls him, just like Shaitan, same to same, because he has been fooling around with the tiffins to be carried into the city for the office workers’ lunch . . . , has been putting Muslim meat compartments into Hindu non-veg tiffin-carriers, customers are up in arms. Little devil, she scolds, but then folds him in her arms, my little farishta, boys will be boys” (SV 91). Critic Joel Kuortti suggests reading this episode via what Jean-François Lyotard describes as the naming ritual a parent imposes on a child: “even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him” (qtd. in Kuortti 137). Gibreel’s stories, however, rewrite this suspicion of referencing. When he begins to dream of himself becoming God’s arch-messenger, Gibreel resents having such an improper proper name: “Gibreel, when he’s tired, wants to murder his mother for giving him such a damn fool nickname, *angel*, what a word, he begs *what? whom?* To be spared the dream-city of crumbling sandcastles and lions with three-tiered teeth, no more heart-washing of prophets or instructions to recite or promises of

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<sup>25</sup> Spivak validly points out the allusion to Ismail in *Moby Dick* in Gibreel’s original name. Spivak argues that this reference emphatically enhances the motif of male bond in *The Satanic Verses* (*Outside* 223-24). There are, however, other biographical readings. For example, Brennan, based on friends’ suggestions, maintains that the Gibreel character refers to the Bombay super movie star Amitabh Bachan (153)—a reference that does not seem necessarily useful for the understanding of the novel.

paradise, let there be an end to revelations, finito, khattam-shud” (SV 122; emphasis in the original).

Saladin, too, suffers from an excess of the naming affair. According to critic Feroza Jussawalla, possible historical references of “Saladin” (the word literally denotes “the religious savior”) include Saladin of the Holy Wars, Saladin the medieval founder of Palestine, as well as the Saladin in *The Divine Comedy*, the only Muslim praised by Dante (107). Furthermore, Saladin’s Anglicized family name Chamcha, shortened by himself from “Chamchawala,” ties him with a strong Indian rootedness. Literally meaning “a spoon,” “chamcha” in the Bombay slang means “groupie, camp follower, gutless, and even sometimes as homosexual” (SV 107). Rushdie himself, already employing the term in *Midnight’s Children* (MC 467), explains the cultural connotations of “chamcha” as follows:

A chamcha . . . is, in fact, a spoon. The word is Urdu; and it also has a second meaning. Colloquially, a chamcha is a person who sucks up to a powerful people, a yes-man, a sycophant. The British Empire would not have lasted a week without such collaborators among its colonized peoples. You could say that the Raj grew fat by being spoon-fed. Well, as we all know, the spoon-feeding ended, or at least ceased to be sufficiently nourishing, and the British left. But the effects of the Empire linger on. (qtd. in Aravamudan 14)

This (subversion of the) overdetermination of the signifier *qua* the name in the naming incidents is coupled with numerous naming accidents. While the stories meander through various historical times, characters from different time eras appear as namesakes, with the “original” oftentimes a historical figure. A sense of uncanniness aroused by recurrences is more than palpable. Moreover, the signifying matrix constituted by various formulae of signification, the literal and the allegorical among

them, lurks everywhere, ready to interpolate in the scene of naming. Ayesha, the first wife of Muhammad the founder of Islam in history, in one episode of the novel is the name of the favorite wife of the Prophet figure in the novel, Mahound; in another episode she becomes the mysterious Indian Muslim prophetess who leads villagers of Titlipur (Butterfly Town) onto a walking pilgrimage to Mecca across the Arabian Sea; and in yet another episode she turns into a vicious goddess who eventually is crushed by the Imam. Hind, the virulent wife of the Grandee who once defeated Mahound before the victory of Submission (the literal meaning of “Islam”), in the modern-day episodes becomes the wife of a Bangladeshi restaurant owner in London. On the other hand, the modern-day namesake of the Grandee, Abu Simbel, is an African black-power activist wrongly executed for accusations of serial murders in a racially tense immigrant neighborhood in London. Gibreel’s lover, Alleluia, bears the surname Cone, an alteration from Cohen made by her Jewish Polish émigré father as a protest against their victimized past under the Nazi terror; on the other hand, the hill where revelations dawn on Mahound is called Mount Cone. When Gibreel later persuades himself to take up the role of the archangel and take revenge on the soulless city London, he is convinced that Alleluia, nicknamed Allie, has degraded into an embodiment of betrayal, Al-Lat, the namesake of one of the three pagan goddesses that Mahound has set out to destroy in order to establish his monotheism. Or, the proper name of London, in the tongue of outsiders, is translated into “Ellowen Deeowen” or “Babylondon,” as a corrupt form of Babylon, which itself is already a sign of human corruption, Babel: “There is no Proper London: not this improper city. Airstrip One, Mahagonny, Alphaville. He [Gibreel] wanders through a confusion of languages. Babel: a contraction of the Assyrian ‘babilu.’ ‘The gate of God.’ Babylondon” (SV 459).

The list can go on. If these names are not necessarily “images of a single troubled mind freely associating” (Brennan 155), the scene of naming does turn into an overwhelming obscenity. Critic Brian Finney rightly suggests that, in the naming scene, Rushdie is using language to highlight the lack of distinction between the material world and the imaginative world (85). To be sure, Rushdie also foregrounds the very materiality of language, for naming becomes the forefront where “similitudes between the idioms of betrayal and loyalty” (Suleri 192) are acted out literally and nakedly. As mentioned above, naming in the hands of poststructuralist theories such as Lyotard signifies the floating scenario of signification, the discrepancy between the name and its referent. I argue that while the naming scene in *The Satanic Verses* to some extent flirts with this kind of poststructuralist reasonable doubt, it does not settle there. Instead, through all the negotiations between proper and improper naming, or between chance and historical necessity, *The Satanic Verses* points towards a realization that addresses not so much a call for difference as the reality of sameness. Naming, thus, can be seen as a postcolonial dialectical image in the Benjaminian sense, an image that helps illuminate the necessary elements for our historical understanding.

The questioning of difference is further posed in the novel by way of several magic numbers. Take, for instance, the numeral 420, the flight number of the hijacked and exploded plane. One of the most popular Hindi movies produced in Bombay in the 1950s is entitled *Shri Charsawbees*, denoting “Mr. 420.” Not only is the movie referred to in *The Satanic Verses* (SV 407, 440), the novel makes palpable the status of “Mr. 420” as a cultural index when a tune from the movie is sung by Gibreel during his fall: “‘O, my shoes are Japanese,’ Gibreel sang, translating the old song into English in semi-conscious deference to the uprushing host-nation, ‘These trousers English, if you please. On my head, red Russian hat; my heart’s Indian for all that’” (SV 5). Furthermore, section 420 in the Indian Code of Criminal Procedure originally



established by the colonial British empire, refers to “small-scale fraud and confidence tricks,” echoing the connotations of the name “Chamcha.” Indira and Sanjay Gandhi’s rule of India is also indexed because a famous graffiti at that time mocks Sanjay’s 4-point program and Indira’s 20-point program as “4+20=420” (Aravamudan 6-7). What is noteworthy is that, in effect, the cultural allusions to the number 420 already happen in *Midnight’s Children* (MC 235, 259, 519).

Numeral 96 and numeral 111 in the novel further figure as the struggle between monotheism and polytheism. According to Srinivas Aravamudan, the sura in the Qur’an that records the first revelation (when Muhammad is asked to accept Allah as the only God) is sura 96. In the novel, the year that Saladin leaves for Britain is year 1961 (which also happens to be the year Rushdie himself went to Britain for the first time in his life). The cunning of 1961 is immediately recognized by the narrator of the novel: “a year you could turn upside down and it would still, unlike your watch, tell the same time” (SV 42). Not only does this number suggest the gnomonic logic of reversibility, “1961” can also be seen as “96” surrounded by two “1”s, representing Muhammad’s monotheist hegemony (Aravamudan 15). The numeral 111, on the other hand, is first of all the number of days the airplane is controlled by hijackers. Moreover, “111” “one one one” names the repeated insistence on monotheism the Prophet figure, Mahound, comes to represent. In one episode, Mahound rescues a slave from the latter’s master when the slave insists that there is only one God in the universe: “*One one one.*” Mahound’s enemy, the Grandee, recalls this scene later and is appalled by Mahound’s “terrifying singularity” (SV 102). Yet, when three onenesses stand side by side, the possibility of polytheism arises automatically. Aravamudan puts it well: “Mahound’s reply to the temptation of polytheism is ‘*one one one,*’ hinting at the paradoxical space for polytheism created by repetition of a ‘one’ which cannot be identical with itself, even as it alludes back to the three goddesses in question” (15-16).

Sara Suleri suggests that the hegemony of oneness is disturbed by the number “two”: “the text’s tautological insistence on at least two central protagonists, at least two nations on the verge of crisis, at least two prophets to embody the centrality of doubt to the structure of religious discourse” (195). Suleri has sought to read religious fidelity into the novel’s ostensible blasphemy in the midst of the *fatwa* controversy, yet her reading seems to flirt with the definitive oneness as well. For instance, she contends that Mahound stands for a discursive necessity for the nationalist imagination of history (“the prophet figures as the one body cognizant of the intransigent idea of nation” [200]), or that “history happens with less fuss when it is impelled by the modernity of a unitary narrative” (199). Furthermore, after foregrounding the motif of doubleness, she goes on to dismiss the number “two”: “By linking his narrative to the structure of a necessary tautology, Rushdie both crucially revises the unitary myth of Islamic culture and continues that obsessive tale of Anglo-India, which can only sexualize colonial exchange in terms of an aborted homoeroticism” (195). In other words, Suleri views Rushdie’s novel as mimicking the typical homoerotic/homophobic paradigm of colonial discourse. While such an eroticized version of history can be suggestive, Suleri’s reading is coupled with a sense of nostalgia for the “singled-minded commitment to the pragmatics of prophecy” figured by Mahound (200). The episode of the satanic verses, wherein Mahound mistakes the devil’s verses for godly messages, is construed by her as “a proleptic figure for the seductions of cultural difference that obtain in the Indian subcontinent” (201). The reader is hard-pressed to decide on the destiny of such seductions in the critic’s swaying.

## VI. De-fetishizing Magic Numbers

If the narrative teemed with proliferated images in *Midnight’s Children* names the impossibility to break from the cultural pedagogy, the instances of naming,

numbering, doubling, and multiplying in *The Satanic Verses* further strengthen the ethos of sameness and figure as the overdetermined condition of postcoloniality. One wonders now whether the postcolonial subject can ever escape from the manipulation of the cultural pedagogy.

In the midst of postcolonial national narrative's fear of sameness, evinced in *Midnight's Children*, the trace of "culture" lingers and plays an essential part without the postcolonial subject's knowledge. Towards the end of his memoir, Saleem believes that his body is about to fall apart. At that moment, he hears his baby son utter his very first word ever, Abracadabra. The amazed Saleem hastens to explain that "Abracadabra" is not an Indian word at all; it derives from the Jewish cabbalistic tradition and denotes the number 365: the number of the days of the year, of the heavens, and of the spirits emanating from the god Abraxas (*MC* 547-48). The fact that this Indian Muslim baby starts his cultural journey in the world via a concept outside of his "original" culture already says a lot about the inherent difference or otherness in tradition. In addition, in the utterance of this series of syllables "Abracadabra," both senses and senselessness come into play. There are indeed a set of predetermined signifieds attached to this word. Yet at the same time, this series of sounds "Abracadabra" can literally refuse any overdetermination. After the Abracadabra-baby talk incident, Saleem and his son accompany Saleem's aged snake-charmer friend, Picture Singh, on a trip to challenge a younger charmer who has stolen Singh's championship title—yet another example of the struggle for difference. On board the train, it occurs to Saleem that the sound of the train's engine resembles "A-bra-ca-da-bra." While this association reveals once again the limitation of Saleem's imagination, which ostensibly cannot escape culturally-charged signs nor the impetus to interpret, what is noteworthy is that the signifying act accidentally swerves in the production of these syllables "A-bra-ca-da-bra." The associating and moderating

power of the magic number melts down into nothing but a few sounds that help the postcolonial subject sustain a physical relationship with the world. So it seems that what faces the postcolonial subject, at the end of the day, is the need to de-fetishize other overpowering magic numbers inscribed in the postcolonial existence, such as “1947.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Time and the Other:

#### Haunted Writing in Theresa Hak Hyung Cha

*This formulation of the paradox and of the impossible therefore calls upon a figure that resembles a structure of temporality, an instantaneous dissociation from the present, a différance in being-with-itself of the present.*

--Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*

From the ontological inquiry grounded in my study of Rushdie, I will begin exploring the question of ethics in the postcolonial context. If Rushdie's works demonstrate the profaneness of immediacy in the representation of history—a profaneness that constitutes the postcolonial experience—Theresa Cha's work brings into light the impossibility of exorcizing the haunting ghost that lingers around from the past or from the unrepresentable realms. It is in this impossibility, as her work suggests, that an ethical experience is rendered possible. In this chapter, I also address the limits of identity politics in a close-up way when I discuss Cha's position in Asian American studies in the latter's self-positioning as a minority discourse.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in his 2000 book, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, launches a heavy-duty intervention into postcolonial studies by proposing ontological considerations of political discourses and social thought. His project seeks to broaden the critique of historicism by bringing into light the global impact of historicism, whose underpinning assumption holds that “to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in

its historical development” (6). While this argument is not drastically unprecedented,<sup>1</sup> Chakrabarty distinguishes his approach from previous ones by cautiously negotiating for retention of certain universals which, though normally associated with historicism and European modernity such as modern politics and social justice, are to be of great use for postcolonial communities.

What is more noteworthy is that Chakrabarty here has attempted to veer from the model of the Indian Subaltern Studies group which he has been actively involved with.<sup>2</sup> The effort to resuscitate the subaltern class’s historical consciousness and agency that has informed the Subaltern Studies’ founding principle is now deemed inadequate by Chakrabarty. It is inadequate, according to him, mostly because the historian, however well-meaning, cannot overcome the secular conditionality of history as a discipline. That is, the evidence-driven discursivity of historical narratives renders it impossible to approach, for instance, the supernatural element in historical events. Commenting on the methodology of Ranajit Guha, the founding father of the Subaltern Studies, Chakrabarty points out that Guha’s interpretation of the nineteenth-century Santal peasants’ rebellion against the British colonialization fails to accommodate in the historian’s narrative the Santal’s claim that God was the real instigator of the insurgence. Yet, the alternative that Chakrabarty proposes, instead of completely abandoning the disciplinarity of historical narratives, in effect aims to add an extra dimension to it:

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<sup>1</sup> Chakrabarty himself has pointed out that Western thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Fredric Jameson, and Lawrence Grossberg, among others, have either questioned historicism or attributed the decline of historicism to the logic of late capitalism. Chakrabarty departs from them by arguing for the rootedness of “late capitalism” in the Third World.

<sup>2</sup> Founded by Ranajit Guha, the Subaltern Studies involves a group of now established scholars who approach Indian colonial and modern history by focusing on the subaltern classes. Many of these scholars are now based in the United States, including Dipesh Chakrabarty himself, Partha Chatterjee, and Gyan Prakash.

We can . . . treat [the Santal] as a signifier of other times and societies. This gesture maintains a subject-object relationship between the historian and the evidence. . . . But the Santal with his statement “I did as my god told me to do” also faces us as a way of being in this world, and we could ask ourselves: Is that way of being a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present? Does the Santal help us to understand a principle by which we also live in certain instances? This question does not historicize or anthropologize the Santal, *for the illustrative power of the Santal as an example of a present possibility does not depend on his otherness*. Here the Santal stands as our contemporary, and the subject-object relationship that normally defines the historian’s relationship to his or her archives is dissolved in this gesture. To stay with the heterogeneity of the moment when the historian meets with the peasant is, then, to stay with the difference between these two gestures. One is that of historicizing the Santal in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy; and the other, that of refusing to historicize and of seeing the Santal as a figure illuminating a life possibility for the present. Taken together, the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present. The archives thus help bring to view the disjointed nature of any particular “now” one may inhabit; that is the function of subaltern pasts. (108; emphasis mine)

By calling the Santal our contemporary, the historian does not mean to appropriate the past in the interest of the present; nor does he content himself with the marked difference between the Santal and the modern subject in the spirit of cultural relativism. Moreover, the historian makes it crystal clear that the last thing he would

consider is to see the Santal as a radical other (“the illustrative power of the Santal as an example of a present possibility does not depend on his otherness” [110]). Instead, Chakrabarty foregrounds the probable otherness of the present with itself—“other” because what separates the Santal from the present only brings into light and calls into question the existence and justification of boundaries such as the modern, the non-modern, the rational, and the religious. By calling the Santal our contemporary, then, the historian reminds us that the Santal in effect has always lingered alongside “the present,” even “if only as that which exists as the limit or the border to the practices and discourses that define the modern” (110).

Chakrabarty represents an unusual example among current postcolonial-theory practitioners in his extension of postcolonial issues beyond political parameters into the ontological horizon. By calling the Santal our contemporary, he is modeled on two seemingly incongruous philosophical discourses: the Heideggerian temporalization of *Dasein* (which Chakrabarty defines as a forever lack in the realization of the “now”), and Derrida’s figuration of a disjointed time whose name is “the present.” For Chakrabarty, a “good” history is one that takes into consideration the “ontological now,” the kind of temporality that presupposes a plurality of times co-existing with one another—in other words, “a disjuncture of the present with itself” (113, 109). The “contemporaneity” of the past with the present, as Chakrabarty views it, serves as a Derridean “supplement,” for this contemporaneity renders history possible and at the same time helps show what the limits of history are as a discipline.

Chakrabarty does not elaborate on why he groups Heidegger and Derrida together—after all, the latter’s figuration of disjointed time is in effect meant to critique the former’s obsession with presence. Yet, Chakrabarty’s attempt to ontologically revamp the discipline of history is notable. His entire project, as he repeatedly stresses, is informed by a dual vision: to draw on the analytical,



universalizing heritage represented by Marx's "good" historicism<sup>3</sup> on the one hand, and the hermeneutic, affective tradition represented by Heidegger on the other hand. In different phrasing, he distinguishes these two traditions by calling those "elements that are congenial to reproduction and reinforcement of the logic of capital" History 1 and the hitherto marginalized life possibilities History 2 or the "subaltern history" (62-71). Nevertheless, Chakrabarty's subaltern history emphatically centralizes the idiom of labor—the most conspicuous move is his essentialization of "real labor" as the subaltern and, conversely, the subaltern as "real labor." One, then, wonders if anybody fits into his subaltern history, especially those who are outside the pale of use value such as the mentally ill and the homeless, since Chakrabarty himself has clearly stated that "a madman's narrative is not history" (98).<sup>4</sup> Even his indebtedness to Heidegger or the affective heritage falls short of recognizing the absolutely unrepresentable. For his ultimate bottom line is still drawn at the edge of political modernity, however pluralized he has configured it to be: "For me, provincializing Europe has been a question of how we create conjoined and disjunctive genealogies for European categories of political modernity as we contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole" (255).

Opening this chapter with a critique of Chakrabarty's alternative history, I hope to situate the primary subject of this chapter, Korean American writer/artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, in a broader context. Chakrabarty's theoretical practice has remarkably pushed the envelope in postcolonial studies not only by questioning the methodology of progressive anti-Eurocentric discourses such as the Subaltern Studies, but also by attending to the rationally inaccessible such as

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<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, Chakrabarty does not intend to discard all elements in historicism. Rather, he proposes to retain certain abstract universals so as to effect productive critiques of social injustices.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Professor Timothy Watson of Princeton University for this observation.

religiosity. As argued above, however, in endeavoring to reconfigure the ethics of postcolonial historical narration, Chakrabarty eventually draws a clear-cut line at the front of political modernity, which, in the final analysis, is deeply grounded within the parameters of rationality. If Derrida is right in stipulating that all ontologization is met with some moment of mourning (*Specters* 9), Chakrabarty's ontologization seems to flirt with a sense of plenitude and a politically charged teleology. It seems that every historical subject, be it religiously informed or not, is considered, first and foremost, as a political subject in Chakrabarty's theorization; every historical subject, be it the proper subject of historical narratives or not, is presumed to welcome institutional modernity and social justice as the primary imperative in life. That is why, at the end of his book, Chakrabarty no longer mentions Derrida but, instead, chooses to land at Heidegger's hermeneutics—a hermeneutics of presence, as Derrida would have it.

To read *Dictée*, I will argue, is to draw attention to the ontological dimensions of postcoloniality by attending to the absolutely un(re)presentable. To say the least, the “subjects” that *Dictée* addresses are by no means containable in Chakrabarty's putatively all-inclusive category of labor (as mentioned above, Chakrabarty essentializes the subaltern as “real labor” and “real labor” as the subaltern). Furthermore, of central importance to my project has been to contest the primacy of difference substantiated by a “manageable” Self-Other dynamic—“manageable” in the sense that both the Self and the Other appear to be locatable via their mutual positionings. In *Dictée*, the most radical possibility of the Other *qua* death emerges to challenge this scheme of manageability. Alongside the (unpresentable) presence of this radical Other is the figure of haunting. If, in Rushdie, the overdetermination of postcoloniality is materialized in a narrative structure haunted by the same images, in Cha, repetition of history that informs ontology turns into a potentially ethical move. That is, the postcolonial, post-diasporic subject in *Dictée* survives the violence of

colonial and contemporary imperialisms not by resisting the haunting of the formidable Other (in this case, history or radicalized history *qua* death), but by yielding herself to multiple others in a community that does not necessarily have a name.

The primary inspiration for my inquiry into these ontological and ethical possibilities of postcoloniality is Derrida's 1993 work, *Spectres de Marx*, where he deliberates on the conjunction between haunting, difference, and ethics. As argued in the previous chapter, postcolonial historical cognition oftentimes proceeds within an obscene immediacy—that is, there is usually little possibility to keep a dignified critical distance with a historical event. Hence the senseless repetition of the same allegorical impulse. In this chapter, I would like to further this thought by proposing that postcolonial history very often “makes sense” only retroactively in the midst of recurrent, repeated, and haunting tropes. This retroactive cognition, moreover, can point towards an ethical reception of history in the sense of shifting attention away from power relations to the sense of responsibility for the other. That is why, as Derrida has suggested, one should not try to exorcise ghosts too hastily.

But first, I would like to examine Cha's position in Asian American literature. In the same spirit as my analysis of Chakrabarty above, I would like to address the limitation of progressive identity politics in current Asian American studies so as to foreground the significance of Cha's proposition—even though Cha in effect has served as a useful exemplar for this progressive politics. This critical engagement is timely in that postcolonial discourse, to a great extent, has been regarded or has regarded itself as being congenial to minority discourse—the former has absorbed a great deal of anti-hegemonic, anti-ethnocentric momentum from the latter, to say the least.<sup>5</sup> Yet the strategies of identity politics informing minority discourse, I argue, can

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<sup>5</sup> See Introduction, note 1.

be restraining in the consideration of the current postcolonial exigency vis-à-vis the transforming configuration of national and cultural identification.

### I. Cha and Asian American Literature

Cha's *Dictée*, first published in 1982, emerges at a time when Asian American studies has just begun to gain currency in academia. When identity politics predominates the critical scene and when sociological approach to literature is normative,<sup>6</sup> the unconventional texture of *Dictée* predetermines its negligence by critics. It is not until the 1990s, when critical attention in the field itself begins to shift from identity politics to more global concerns,<sup>7</sup> that *Dictée* is revamped as an interrogation of the ideological nature of Asian American studies. Most directly responsible for mass attention to *Dictée* are editors and contributors of the collection *Writing Self Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée*, including Elaine H. Kim, Norma Alarcón, Hyun Yi Kang, Lisa Lowe, and Shelley Sunn Wong. For these critics, *Dictée* stands out as an important work for advancing a paradigm shift in Asian American studies, though the prospect of the shift differs from critic to critic. If, for Shelley Wong, *Dictée* rewrites Asian American configuration by refracting earlier identity politics of representativeness and authenticity into difference and mediation (104), what concerns Elaine Kim and Hyun Yi Kang, on the other hand, remains a mainstream ethos of representativeness. Both Kim and Kang call from their personal experiences for more attention to Korean and Korean American histories in

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the work of one of the founding scholars of Asian American literary studies, Elaine Kim (*Asian American*; "Defining"), which focuses primarily on the evolution of Asian American consciousness and self-image expressed in literature and on the way in which literature elucidates the social history of Asians in the United States.

<sup>7</sup> For example, some critics propose to consider Asian American identities not vis-à-vis the concept of America, but in relation to Asia or the global. The marriage of postcolonial concerns and ethnic studies, thus, becomes more than desirable. For such debates, see Lisa Lowe ("Heterogeneity"; "Decolonization"); Rachel Lee; Jinqi Ling; Shu-mei Shih ("Nationalism"); and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong.

mainstream arenas, and both commend *Dictée* for having enhanced visibility of Korean and Korean American subjects.

Shelley Wong's approach appears to differ drastically from Kim's and Kang's. Wong painstakingly seeks to posit *Dictée* as a radical alterity in Asian American discourse and to locate *Dictée*'s political valence in this very alterity. The display of multiple positions in *Dictée*, Wong contends, disturbs the model of identity politics championed by ethnic minority discourse in general and Asian American cultural nationalism in particular. Wong very lucidly lays bare the myth of the American *Bildung* in relation to ethnic identification—a paradigm that prescribes the ultimate assimilation of all immigrant groups into a big American family. With the American *Bildung*, then, the individual's growth epitomizes the typology of development in the interest of the ideology of multiculturalism: “a structuring discourse of wholeness reads difference primarily as the prefiguration of final identity” (129). By way of its nonrealist language, in contrast, *Dictée* launches a trenchant critique of “identity and foundational discourses” (130), that is, discourses that valorize the sociological representativeness of a narrative, the authenticity of a literary representation, and the typology of wholeness.

Wong's distrust of identity politics, however, has a certain limit. In place of the earlier ethos of representativeness, Wong calls for nothing but more room for a growingly diversified demography:

In the face of a radically repositioned constituency, Asian American cultural nationalism became less and less able to specify a common political agenda and cultural identity around which the entire Asian American population could cohere. The respective needs—economic, social, political, cultural—of an increasingly diverse population which included fourth-generation Japanese American

professionals as well as first-generation Hmong farmers could hardly be addressed or accommodated within a single oppositional program. (132)

Wong's complaint about critic Stephen-Paul Martin, for instance, focuses on the fact that the latter omits Cha's Korean name in his work—a negligence of “matters of race or nationality” (135). Yet, at the same time, Wong strongly questions the “ethnicity paradigm” as well as the male-identified nationalism inscribed in mainstream ethnic discourse. The line that is to be drawn between critical categories (race, nationality, or ethnicity) is vague if not irrational. Moreover, if a male-identified nationalism is undesirable, why is a nationalism promulgated by a Korean American female immigrant ought to be automatically sanctified?

It all seems that, while noting the political poetics of “unnaming” in *Dictée* (118), Wong is appealing for nothing but more names and sub-categories for minorities: woman, the religious subject, the colonial subject, the postcolonial subject, and so on. In this light, even if she does not subscribe to an ethos of wholeness, Wong's wish to incorporate every emergent subjectivity into the political agenda, to a great extent, resembles conventional identity politics. For both operate along the line of specificity *qua* representativeness. While *Dictée* demands an attention to “those persistent clamourings of difference which threaten always to spill over the pristine foundations of the once-upon-a-time” and henceforth resists absorption by an American identity (136), Wong's reading, in the final analysis, has it that *Dictée* be read as a reference to “the difference of the Korean American immigrant woman” (135). Eventually, it is a politics of difference longing for identity politics. It is also a localizing project in its valorization of a specificity as an example of a generality; it is, in other words, a mathematical rule of adding more minority differences to the equation.

Lisa Lowe's reading echoes Wong's in stressing the "aesthetic of infidelity" in *Dictée* that defies the ethos of commensurability in national and cultural discourses ("Unfaithful" 37). The recurrent dictation and translation exercises in *Dictée*, as Lowe acutely points out, serve to question the ideology of equivalence substantiated in imperialist and nationalist idioms. Lowe concludes by calling for a marriage of identity politics and politics of difference and by commending *Dictée* for exemplifying such an engagement. Lowe here sees identity politics and politics of difference as two separate enterprises. Yet these two, more often than not, prove to be two sides of one coin in today's minority political struggles in the sense that the appeal for heterogeneity and multiplicity always comes down to a politics of identity. I will return to the limits of difference-driven identity politics again when I discuss current identity issues in Taiwan in the next chapter. Suffice it to say here that this kind of identity politics/politics of difference eyes political gain at the expense of attention to the radically un(re)presentable.

Critic Shu-mei Shih has also provided a perceptive reading of *Dictée*, especially of the text's positing of the universal female figure in opposition to teleological, patriarchal nationalism. Yet Shih's reading, too, is trapped in a kind of identity politics due to its essentialization. She applies the category of "1.5 generation," which has been popularly employed in the Korean American community, to the reading of *Dictée*. The 1.5 generation, according to her, capitalizes certain demographic generalities and can avoid the stiff divisions between the first, second, and third generations:

Born in Asia but emigrating at an early age, the 1.5 generation comes to America and grows up often as fully acculturated as second generation, but there is usually a less adamant rejection of the Asian country from where the family emigrated. Though not always bilingual, they are

often bicultural, and they maintain a profoundly ambiguous relationship to both the country in which they grow up and the country of their birth. They are simultaneously the immigrant whom American-born Asian Americans may despise and attempt to alienate, and the acculturated American who shares the language and experience of the American-born. Hence they are in a sense neither “Asian,” “American,” nor “Asian American,” while at the same time being all of these.

(“Nationalism” 145-46)

Shih means to substitute the notion of “1.5 generation” for concepts like “in-between” and “interstitial”—the spatial figuration of the latter, she argues, falls short in accounting for the simultaneity that certain immigrant subjects occupy. This sensitivity to the inadequacy of the above concepts is commendable, yet to replace these terms with a concrete sociological generalization seems anything but rigorous. Similarly, her attention to the importance of universalism in *Dictée* eventually gives way to her realistic localization of Theresa Cha the author.

These affirmative readings all foreground the anti-nationalist, anti-representative, and non-identitarian installations in *Dictée* to bring into light the desirable paradigm shift in Asian American literature away from conventional identity politics. I argue that these *Dictée* promoters’ fine readings have their limitations in the sense that they all insist on a difference-substantiated identity politics in the final instance—that is, they all seek their ultimate teleology within political parameters. My reading in these pages would like to focus on the ontologization of politics instantiated by *Dictée*. In particular, I would like to look beyond the localizing scope, which mostly reads *Dictée* as an illustration of an Asian American female writer’s specificity. The primacy of historical specificity stressed by critics, I suggest, is tantamount to a more refined identity politics. If earlier identity politics is primarily invested in



representativeness, progressive identity politics, such as that of Wong, Lowe, and Shih, aims to re-represent the non-identical subject. What is missing, however, is the un(re)presentable.

As previewed above, I will address the question of haunted history in *Dictée* by reading Cha in tandem with Derrida. An accompanying reason for engaging Derrida here is to probe into some critics' generalized application of what is commonly termed "poststructuralism." For one thing, Derrida's signature notion *différance* has served as a master signifier in many minority discourses and certain postcolonial discourses. Shelley Wong, for instance, contends that *Dictée* resists absorption by an American identity by way of constantly positing "surplus" or "excess." The way in which the "stain" of the syntax of *Dictée* spills on the language of the cultural center, to be sure, resembles the moment of mimicry Bhabha has championed. Drawing on Derrida, Bhabha proposes a "supplementary" sentiment—that is, the postcolonial, if unable to "add up," at least can disturb the calculation by "adding to" the cultural pedagogy (155). The problem with this proposition is that it risks perpetuating the equivalence between the postcolonial subject and the Other in cultural signification. Rushdie's novels have demonstrated that the "postcolonial = the other-ed" formula is not necessarily the best approach to postcoloniality, at least not to, say, "metropolitan postcoloniality" portrayed in many of Rushdie's works. Furthermore, the kind of postcoloniality that is predicated upon universality and a yielding to the other(s), illustrated in *Dictée*, will show that a new way of configuring the postcolonial subject can be fruitful.

## II. Ghostly History

Commenting on Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Working of Mourning, and the New International*, Fredric Jameson invites attention to

the dense materiality and the formative valence of figuration in Derrida's philosophical inquiries. It is also in this regard that Jameson finds a point of convergence with the deconstructionist—that is, Derrida's concentrated figuration is deemed as a certain formalism, something that grounds a significant portion of Jameson's own theoretical corpus: “a certain formalism . . . offers the opportunity to change the valencies on the problem, to adjust the lens of thought in such a way that suddenly we find ourselves focusing, not on the presumed content of the opposition, but rather on the well-nigh material grain of its arguments, an optical adjustment that leads us in new and wholly unexpected directions” (“Marx's” 40-41).

Critics in general read Derrida's theorization of the spectral image in *Specters of Marx* as a dwelling on one's relationship with the past—Jameson, among others, urges the reader to examine why the conceptuality of the spectral can serve as a possible solution to “the false problem of the antithesis between humanism (respect of the past) and nihilism (end of history, disappearance of the past)” (“Marx's” 41).<sup>8</sup> A more relevant reading, on the other hand, is Pheng Cheah's proposition that considers Derridean spectralization as a radical finitude or an inscription of death within life, viewing the relationship between the “proper body of the living nation-people” and the bourgeois postcolonial state as a “living on with, in, and through a certain kind of death.” Cheah concretizes the “death” figuration as variations of technicity affecting the living nation such as the formative role of modern knowledge, organization in the genesis of the nation, public reason, as well as other monitoring and manipulating technics of the state in the service of capital (*Spectral* 420-21; also see a similar version in “Living On”). His reading, in a sense, echoes Chakrabarty's return to the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ghostly Demarcations*, edited by Michael Sprinker, contains responses to *Specters of Marx* by some of the most publicized critics of the time including, Antonio Negri, Pierre Macherey, Fredric Jameson, Warren Montag, Terry Eagleton, Aijaz Ahmad, and Tom Lewis. These critics mostly focus on the long-awaited rendez-vous between deconstruction and Marxism.

ontologized version of Marx's critique of capital, with Marx's category of labor translated into "the subaltern" in Chakrabarty and "living nation-people" in Cheah.

My engagement with Derrida aims to extend the consideration of political conditions beyond the pale of labor, capitalist technē, commodity, and so on, and confront nothing other than death in its literality in the postcolonial context. Only in this way, I argue, can one reach the mistiest area in the consideration of the Other. Derrida's writing on Marx restates the importance of treating issues of politics ontologically, however impossible the discourse involved may appear. In addition, as Jameson has suggested, it is worthwhile to examine the density of figuration in Derrida's theoretical discourse. What is particularly noteworthy is Derrida's ability to bring into light not only the relevance of certain figural images but, more significantly, the repetition of them in the philosophical tradition. Moreover, Derrida's configuration of the relationship between temporality and ethics—especially his proposal of rendering "justice" to the absolute singularity of a "pre-" condition (whatever comes first)—will serve as a useful point of intervention into future postcolonial thinking.

Derrida's engagement with Marxian discourse in *Specters of Marx*, an extension of a plenary address he delivered at the "Wither Marxism? Global Crises in International Perspective" conference held in Irvine, California in 1993, to a great extent marks deconstruction's self-repositioning vis-à-vis the perennial "crisis" of Marxism. The latter seems to have been predestined at the outset as Marx and Engels themselves already talk about their own possible "aging" and their "historicity" (qtd. in Derrida, *Specters* 13). So is it possible that the nature of Marxian discourse irreducibly makes it more susceptible to age while the nature of deconstruction does the opposite? Can this very difference of discursive nature have occasioned this overdue deconstructionist engagement with Marxism? Aijaz Ahmad reads Derrida's reference to the disavowed Hamlet, the governing trope in *Specters of Marx*, as

Derrida's own "mourning" that it is the neo-liberal rightists instead of deconstructionists who have inherited the legacy of Marxism after the collapse of historical Marxism ("Reconciling" 92-94). I hesitate to endorse this allegorization, but I argue that the collapse of historical Marxism is very likely the condition of possibility for a deconstructionist (re)connection with Marxism: a Marxism divested of goal-oriented politics in the real world appears to be a serener dialogue partner with deconstruction.

If one of Derrida's signature moves is to conduct a linguistically driven reasoning, his brilliance rests in his knack for making historical and conceptual connections within and beyond linguistic realms. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida first links the spectral image in Marx's thinking with the fatherly ghost in *Hamlet*, citing on the side thinkers who have drawn on the same figure, including Paul Valéry and Maurice Blanchot. From Hamlet's famous line, "The time is out of joint," Derrida returns to his mother tongue, examines various translations, and spells out the legitimacy of pondering on disjointed time in conjunction with ethics. Gide's translation of "The time is out of joint"—"Cette époque est déshonorée" ("this age is dishonored")—as Derrida maintains, demonstrates a valid transit from the "disadjusted" to the "unjust." Derrida's ultimate move, furthermore, is to name this temporal disadjustment as the condition of justice (19-20). This linguistic connection between the disadjusted and the unjust also finds an echo in Heidegger's interpretation of *Dikē* (as joining, adjoining, adjustment) and *Adikia* (as disjointed, undone, twisted, and out of line) (23). Dissatisfied with Heidegger's residual obsession with presence, however, Derrida stipulates that genuine justice—in opposition to juridical justice and morality—rests in the self's opening up to the absolute singularity of the coming one (*arrivant*).

This kind of linguistically driven reasoning extends into what eventually becomes a key player in his critique of Marx: the concept of *conjunction*. Picking one line from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “All the powers of old Europe have joined into a holy hunt against this specter [communism],” Derrida suggests playing with the French word “conjunction,” which, as he lays out, can mean the conspiracy of those who swear together, the invocation or convocation of a spirit, as well as *conjurement* or magical exorcism (40-48). His final word on Marx laments that the latter is too hasty in conjuring away many ghosts without attending to the philosophical and existential possibilities provided by the linguistic possibilities of the word *conjunction*.

What I would like to focus on for my postcolonial inquiries is the relationship between ethical thinking and the sense of time. More than twenty years prior to the publication of *Specters of Marx*, the Derridean ethics is articulated primarily with the originary status of the other and *différance* in his radical (anti-)ontology called *grammatology*: “There is no ethics without the presence of the other but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, *différance*, writing” (*Grammatology* 140). In *Specters of Marx*, time, dramatized in the specter figure, sets in to complicate the equation. Derrida himself has attempted to preempt doubts about the indiscriminate universalization of “the time is out of joint”—that is, whether or not the Denmark prince’s time also speaks for every temporal juncture in history. Derrida’s answer is primarily prompted by grammatical cues: “In a predicative proposition that refers to time, and more precisely to the present-form of time, the grammatical present of the verb to be, in the third person indicative, seems to offer a predestined hospitality to the return of any and all spirits, a word that one needs merely to write in the plural in order to extend a welcome there to specters” (49-50).

Despite the banality of this answer, when he reiterates his configuration of time in conjunction with his alterity-grounded ethics, the exigency of time becomes more palpable. First of all, from his citation of Gide's translation of "The time is out of joint," it is already notable that Derrida encourages an association between disjointed time and dishonored time. Moreover, he is in effect proposing that every present is inscribed by a vulnerability to ethical treatment as the following sequence renders clear: "No difference without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now" (31). His main contention is that, as every moment of here-now presumes a "non-contemporaneity" with itself, it is ethically and politically necessary and practical to face the alterity in each present. Every present, in other words, is inherently disjointed; every ethical call begins at a disjointed juncture.

The question is: why does every moment of here-now predestine a non-contemporaneity with itself? How can his proposition not be deprived of its ethico-political urgency? Following up on Jameson's comment, I argue that it is in his meticulous attention to figuration that Derrida illuminates the ethical relevance of the here-now. One may even venture to say that only a language of figuration seems capable of configuring this relationship between time and ethics.

The fatherly specter in *Hamlet* is not any *other* figure—that is, its alterity does not derive primarily from its radical difference from the self. On the contrary, the blood relationship and the presumed responsibility of inheritance magnify the anxiety in the son figure that he himself may very well inherit this spectral uncanniness. That is why the here-now does not guarantee a fresh start. If the son refuses to inherit, however, another imperative will be upon him, namely, an imperative for revolution, "a violence, a decision of rupture." This is one of "Marx's three voices" that Blanchot identifies: the political voice, the voice of the revolution not as a final necessity but as

“imminence” or as an opportunity in time to be lived as ever-present demand (qtd. in Derrida, *Specters* 33).

This is the catch-22 confronting the one who comes after. If he decides to take up the responsibility of continuing the line, he faces the uncanny spectrality of his father and also of his own. On the other hand, if he resists the unnaturalness of natural heritage, the impulse for imminence or the urge to provide a new revolutionized time, will always be in order—that is, a kind of Nietzschean impulse to modernize will fall upon him one moment after another. Either way, the present emerges as less than an immanence; either way, the present makes its imprint as a singular instance; and either way, the existence of the ghost bespeaks a finitude. Hence “no singularity without here-now.” As Jameson puts it well, what spectrality says is not that ghosts exist nor that the past is still very well alive, but rather that “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us” (“Marx’s” 39). Derrida’s radical ethics then demands that the one who comes after grant hospitality towards the uncompromisable other *qua* time. Repetition of the spectral figure in Marx’s thinking bespeaks the conditionality of futurist or revolutionary thinking—that is, a thinking of time is always already intertwined with ideological identification.

Another important feature in Derrida’s spectral ethics is that the specter figure comes to disturb the commonly held relationship between subject and object. The “visor effect” created by the specter, the “thing” which looks at me without me knowing what it is, paralyzes the kind of power relationship generally attributed to the subject-object dichotomy. That is, in the encounter with the specter, the one who is looking at us is not necessarily the object while the one who inherits is not necessarily the subject. Put otherwise, the “subject” is not necessarily the one who has power.

Yet the spectral ontology (“hauntology” in Derrida’s coinage) is further complicated when Derrida gets to the multiple meanings accorded to the specter in Marx. On the one hand, as in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, communism is described as a specter haunting Europe. An abstract idea, at once present and futurist awaiting its fulfillment into lived reality, communism as a specter exudes such a threat that even Marx and Engels themselves appear to fear the development of history coming to haunt them from a future time. On the other hand, Marx repeatedly refers to the past experiences as ghosts that need to be conjured away to the benefit of the revolutionaries of today. Thirdly, the whole process of idealization, including the production of exchange-value, the ideologization of the commodity logic, as well as capitalist socialization, is emphatically described as spectralization. All in all, a sense of anxiety lingers in Marx’s choice of figuration: “It is as if Marx and Marxism had run away, fled from themselves, and had scared themselves” (Derrida, *Specters* 105).

Derrida’s ultimate critique of Marx (also of Freud and Heidegger) targets at Marx’s hasty attempt to exorcise ghosts outright or to let the past be past for good:

. . . Marx, *das Unheimliche*, perhaps should not have chased away so many ghosts too quickly. Not all of them at once or not so simply on the pretext that they did not exist . . . or that all this was or ought to remain past (“Let the dead bury their dead,” and so forth). All the more so in that he also knew how to let them go free, emancipate them even, in the movement in which he analyzes the (relative) autonomy of exchange-value, the ideologem, or the fetish. Even if one wanted to, one could not let the dead bury the dead: that has no sense, that is *impossible*. Only mortals, only the living who are not living gods can bury the dead. Only mortals can watch over them, and can watch, period. Ghosts can do so as well, they are everywhere where there is



watching; the dead *cannot do so*—it is impossible and they must not do so. (174-75; emphasis in the original)

Here Derrida first bemoans Marx's eagerness to have the past locked into the past ("to let the dead bury their dead"). The next moment, however, this move to let the dead bury their dead emerges as the example *par excellence* of the impossible, the possibility of which, to be certain, names Derrida's definitive idea of "despairing 'messianism'" or "absolute hospitality"—that is, his ethics (169).<sup>9</sup>

That the without-ground of this impossible can nevertheless *take place* is on the contrary the ruin or the absolute ashes, the threat that must be *thought*, and, why not, exorcised yet again. To exorcise not in order to chase away the ghosts, but this time to grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who would no longer be *revenants*, but as other *arrivants* to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome—without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of a concern for *justice*. Present existence or essence has never been the condition, object, or the *thing* [chose] of justice. One must constantly remember that the impossible ("to let the dead bury their dead") is, alas, always possible. One must constantly remember that this absolute evil (which is, is it not, absolute life, fully present life, the one that does not know death and does not want to hear about it) can

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<sup>9</sup> Earlier in the same chapter, Derrida compares his notion of "absolute hospitality" with the pre-determined, theological, Abrahamic messianism and with the quasi-transcendental capitalist messianism: "One may deem strange, strangely familiar and inhospitable at the same time (*unheimlich*, uncanny), this figure of absolute hospitality whose promise one would choose to entrust to an experience that is so impossible, so unsure in its indigence, to a quasi-'messianism' so anxious, fragile, and impoverished, to an always presupposed 'messianism,' to a quasi-transcendental 'messianism' that also has such an obstinate interest in a materialism without substance: a materialism of the *khôra* for a despairing 'messianism'" (*Specters* 168-69).

take place. One must constantly remember that it is even on the basis of the terrible possibility of this impossible that justice is desirable:

*through* but also *beyond* right and law. (175; emphasis in the original)

My understanding of these passages is that they are not as much contradictory with each other as addressing two separate key points. Derrida remains consistent in his radical ethics in the sense that he grants unconditional priority to whatever seems impossible. On the other hand, drawing on the multi-meaningful French word *conjuraton*, Derrida reminds us to acknowledge the existence of ghosts and to treat them as absolute others that deserve absolute hospitality. Marx himself has realized this ethical move perfectly when he analyzes the “(relative) autonomy of exchange-value, the ideologem, or the fetish,” but he has wrongly sought to chase away these spectral entities all at once. As is shown above, inheritance per se already prescribes the prospect of haunting while haunting, in turn, intimates the possibility of the son’s own uncanniness.

### III. Haunted Writing in *Dictée*

To conjure away the fatherly specter would mean to get rid of oneself; repetition or recurrence of the same spectral figure indicates an impossibility to break from oneself or from one’s own inheritance. In *Dictée*, what figures as this impossibility of breaking from one’s inheritance is the repeated act or image of speaking, uttering, along with the difficulty of such acts.

Without a governing plot line or any central character, *Dictée* consists of several clusters of poems, dictation and translation sequences imitating language-class exercises, fragmented recounts of the history of modern Korea from the colonial period to the time of the Korean War and through the contemporary, allusions to St. Thérèse of Lisieux, personal memoirs in relation to diasporic experience of Koreans,

historical photographs, Chinese calligraphy, maps, inscriptions, and images of body organs. The book is divided into nine chapters, each named after one of the nine muses in the Western literary tradition, although one of the muses “Euterpe” is substituted for by a muse that Cha herself invented: “Elitere.” The epigraph attributed to Sappho at the beginning of the book, according to some critics, is also Cha’s own invention.<sup>10</sup> Although the text rejects straightforward storytelling, and although the text materializes the difficulty of authentic historical writing, the centralization of the erstwhile other-ed subjects seems unmistakable. The allusion to Sappho, the recurrent reference to Diseuse (a professional female reciter who performs in ancient rituals), the recounting of a young female anti-Japanese martyr’s story, of a colonial diasporic female’s experience, and of a female saint’s religious piety—all this seems to instantiate a kind of female rewriting of history whose anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, and anti-nationalist tropes are more than palpable. As a matter of fact, this kind of reading—that is, to read *Dictée* as a critique of male-dominated nationalism and its paraphernalia—is generally shared by critics who champion Cha’s position in Asian American literature, as elaborated above.

What has not been paid much attention to is the dynamic between images and words in *Dictée*, a text that is keen on employing different representational media. Considering that Cha was also an installation and media artist, I propose here to place images in *Dictée* in a more central position in order to obtain a more sophisticated reading of *Dictée*’s poetics, ethics, and politics.

The chapter entitled “Clio/History” opens with the photograph of the young Korean anti-Japanese revolutionary, Yu Guan Soon, followed by an epitaphic note indicating the dates of her birth and death, which then is followed by two big calligraphic Chinese characters denoting “female” and “male” on either side of two

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<sup>10</sup> See Shelly Wong.

facing pages. The written text of this chapter relates how Guan Soon, at age sixteen, leads an anti-Japanese demonstration in the year of 1919. The first noteworthy thing is that *Dictée* in effect does not exclude nationalist sentiments outright. The opening epitaph, for instance, appeals to an ethos of single origin: “She is born of one mother and one father” (25). Elsewhere in the text, the narrator assertively spells out the sanctity of nationalism: “There is no people without a nation, no people without ancestry. There are other nations no matter how small their land, who have their independence. But our country, even with 5, 000 years of history, has lost it to the Japanese” (28). The enunciating subject here speaks from an overdetermined nationalist discourse.

Another thing that deserves attention is the way in which Guan Soon’s death is at once evoked and shunned in the account of her brief life. The opening epitaph mentions that she dies on October 12, 1920, which is roughly one and a half years after her anti-Japanese demonstration takes place. Later in the text, the narrator describes the martyrdom as such:

The march begins, the flags are taken out, made visible, waved, every individual crying out the independence the freedom to the people of this nation. Knowing equally the punishment. Her parents leading the procession fell. Her brothers. Countless others were fired at and stabbed indiscriminately by the enemy soldiers. Guan Soon is arrested as a leader of the revolution, with punishment deserving of such a rank. She is stabbed in the chest, and subjected to questioning to which she reveals no names. She is given seven years prison sentence to which her reply is that the nation itself is imprisoned. (37)

The reader, at this point, should be noticing that, according to the epitaph, Guan Soon dies before her presumable seven-year prison sentence is completed. Yet,

aside from the epitaph, throughout the narrative up to the end the chapter, the narrator has not literally mentioned Guan Soon's death again. Not only does the narrator avoid a direct mention of the child martyr's death, the narrator in effect attempts to immortalize her:

Some will not know age. Some not age. Time stops. Time will stop for some. For them especially. Eternal time. No age. Time fixes for some. Their image, the memory of them is not given to deterioration, unlike the captured image that extracts from the soul precisely by reproducing, multiplying itself. Their countenance evokes not the hallowed beauty, beauty from seasonal decay, evokes not the inevitable, not death, but the dy-ing.

Face to face with the memory, it misses. It's missing. Still. What of time. Does not move. Remains there. Misses nothing. Time, that is. All else. All things else. All other, subject to time. Must answer to time, except. Still born. Aborted. Barely. Infant. Seed, germ, sprout, less even. Dormant. Stagnant. Missing. (37-38)

The narrator apparently has in mind two different images of death. The first one is not subject to deterioration or to time, an image that evokes not death but "the dy-ing." The other image is the "captured image that extracts from the soul precisely by reproducing, multiplying itself," an image that evokes a hallow beauty and the inevitable *qua* death. From the flow of the narrative, it should be reasonable to assume that Guan Soon's image falls into the first category, the image that does not age. While all others are subject to time and must answer to time, she does not. She is the absent referent in truncated phrases like "except."

What, then, can be an example of the image that evokes death as the inevitable?

At the end of the chapter is another historical photograph. No reference provided, this photograph appears to be a scene of execution of three adult men by Japanese soldiers. While Guan Soon's death is not spelled out in the narrative regarding her martyrdom, the chapter ends with the most straightforward representation of death. In comparison with the photograph of Guan Soon wherein she stares audaciously at the camera, the three men in the execution scene are blindfolded in their becoming the object and evidence of historical brutality. If the execution scene suggests the inevitability as well as the "hallowed beauty" of death, the narrator seems to suggest that the photograph of Guan Soon, involving a virtual face-to-face contact between her gaze and the camera/spectator, translates as the "dy-ing." The gaze renders possible a temporal relay from a specific moment in history (the moment when the camera caught her image) all the way to the moment of spectatorship—not only of the here-now but also of always and everywhere insofar as the spectator is caught by the photographic subject's staring. The story of the child martyr as the relay for other revolutionaries, then, can be relayed repeatedly in time because of the direct gaze of her in the photograph and because of the materiality of the photograph.<sup>11</sup>

Roland Barthes towards the end-point of his life chooses to reflect on death through considerations of the ontology of photography. In *Camera Lucida*, he suggests that a historical photograph usually evokes two senses of time which take place almost simultaneously: first, the spectator is reminded that the photographed being "is going to die," and in the next moment the spectator comes to the awareness that the photographed "is dead." The platitude of death, in Barthes's terms, is

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<sup>11</sup> Shu-mei Shih's reading, in contrast, focuses on the impossibility of words in historical representation where violence is imposed: "Yu Guan Soon's photograph, along with the photograph of Koran martyrs crucified in a graveyard awaiting execution by Japanese soldiers, visually addresses the impossibility of historiography (words) to capture history's concrete, material, physical, and above all bloody reality, one filled with 'decapitated forms'" ("Nationalism" 150).

inscribed in the inevitability of this procession of time. In *Dictée*, however, Guan Soon's story is told in such a way that the instantiation of her death sentence is carefully deferred. It is not that the story about the end of her life is unavailable in history (although it is not unlikely that the image of her death is inaccessible). Yet what is more important here, I argue, is that by opening this chapter on Korean colonial history with the image of this young girl and closing this chapter with the image of inevitable death in an anti-colonial history, by putting Guan Soon's name explicitly in the position of the absent in the syntax of historical discourse (those truncated sentences where her name can very well follow "except"), *Dictée* seeks to render Guan Soon's sacrifice an ontological meaning that other ensuing nationalist revolutions, such as the localized anti-colonial movements represented by the execution scene, can rely on. Unlike the "unworking" or platitude of death in Barthes's conception of photography, which apparently frustrates ontological cognition, the imagistic writing in *Dictée* in effect has put *dy-ing*, if not death, to work.

The chapter "Calliope/Epic Poetry" opens with a photograph of a young Asian woman. The written part of the chapter, presumably based on the diary of Cha's mother, is the narrator's dialogue with her mother as an eighteen-year-old Korean girl living in Manchuria in 1940. The narrator of the here and now thus addresses her mother: "Mother, you are eighteen years old. You were born in Yong Jung, Manchuria and this is where you *now* live" (45; emphasis mine). This second-person address creates a simultaneity for various temporalities: not only the narrator's enunciative present, and not only the present of the mother in her youth, but also the present of us as the readers of the here and now. The young woman in the photograph facing us the readers, and the text physically adjacent to the image, also facing us, together with the written words addressing the reader as "Mother," as well as the reversed position between the narrator's mother who actually wrote this diary at a specific historical

moment and the narrator now speaking in the permanent present tense to her mother before the latter becomes a mother—all the multi-layered temporalization reminds one of seventeen-century artist Velàsquez's painting *Las Meninas*, which Foucault has famously analyzed in *The Order of Things*.

In *Las Meninas*, the position occupied by the actual spectator happens to coincide with the position occupied earlier in historical time by the actual painter Velàsquez as well as with the position occupied by the object of the artist figure within the painting, namely, the king and queen, whose images are reflected in the mirror far away from the audience. These multiple temporalities—that is, both the fictional moment (the act of painting within the painting) and the metafictional moment of artistic representation (the relationship between Velàsquez and his own art)—are being subordinated by this vanishing point that is this void we as spectators are occupying here and now. All this anachronism, for Foucault, serves as a perfect trope for the Classical system of order: a space “that is opened up inside representation when representation represents itself, that area where being and the Same reside” (209).

Put otherwise, *Las Meninas* bespeaks a self-referentiality that defines a certain episteme. While the dynamic between words and images in the “Calliope/Epic Poetry” chapter of *Dictée* appears to resemble this self-referentiality, a closer look will reveal that Cha's work in effect promises a more ethical potentiality than, say, *Camera Lucida*'s use of images.

In *Camera Lucida*, which shows two dozens of well-captioned photographs, the most important photograph showing Barthes's mother as a five-year-old girl (the “Winter Garden” photograph) is intriguingly missing. Barthes has read this photograph as the umbilical cord that provides maternal comfort not only for his final reflection on life but also for the possibility of this little monograph on photography.



He writes that “I studied the little girl [in the “Winter Garden” photograph] and at last rediscovered my mother” (69). He also writes that photography gives him a Proustian involuntary memory: “a sentiment as certain as remembrance, just as Proust experienced it one day when, leaning over to take off his boots, there suddenly came to him his grandmother’s true face” (70). What is perplexing is that the Barthes who has named the platitude of photography and who has named the forever absence of the photographed being, here attributes a fullness to photography. Moreover, he chooses to represent that fullness of photography not by showing the very photograph in question, but by resorting to his own words.

The narrator in *Dictée*, on the other hand, opts for the second-person present tense to retell her mother’s story. Each time when the story is being read, the reader in effect occupies not only the position of the Mother as the narrator’s addressee, but also the position that was previously occupied by the narrator’s mother writing the diary, as well as the position of the narrator herself reading her mother’s diary. At the same time, the reader also catches the immediate moment of writing as if the events of storytelling, writing, and reading are always ongoing simultaneously. Unlike *Las Meninas* or *Camera Lucida*, however, *Dictée* is not as much about self-referentiality as about an act of relay in historical representation amongst shifting enunciative and cognitive positions. In the prefatory section, the narrator writes of a professional woman reciter in ancient rituals called Disease: “She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. . . . The others each occupying her. . . . She relays the others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering. Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them” (3-4). The narrating subject does not imagine the others as self-consolidating others. In the relays of storytelling, others’ stories take place in her. The present tense used in “Calliope/Epic Poetry,” then, attests to the “event-ness” of the taking place of others’ life possibilities.

Towards the end of this chapter is the story of a Korean woman's return to her motherland after she has obtained American citizenship. The chapter closes with a photograph of an old Asian woman, which, once again, forms an intriguing dialogue with the text. In the text, the narrator foregrounds carnal images in the woman's returning to her origin country: "You see the color the hue the same you see the shape the form the same you see the unchangeable and the unchanged the same you smell filtered edited through progress and westernization the same . . . speech, the same" (57). Then the narrator describes how at the customs, the maternal rooted-ness that this returned woman is seeking has been neutralized: "Not a single word allowed to utter until the last station, they ask to check the baggage. You open your mouth half way. Near tears, nearly saying, I know you I know you, I have waited to see you for long this long. They check each article, question you on foreign articles, then dismiss you" (58). In contrast to the emphasis on visual perceptions in the text ("You see the color the hue the same you see the shape . . ."), the photograph shows the old woman having her lips tightly shut and eyes turned away from the camera, positing an extension of the words in the text.

To say that *Dictée* is solely for the valorization of "the difference of the Korean American immigrant woman" (Wong, Shelley 135) is to neglect its universalizing attempt.<sup>12</sup> If anything, *Dictée* tends to couple political messages with universalizing moves. In the following passage, for instance, the critique of the language crisis in postcoloniality ("broken tongue," "cracked tongue," or "pidgin ["pidgeon" in the text]) turns into a non-political pathos lamenting the difficulty of speech:

One by one.

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<sup>12</sup> Shu-mei Shih has already noted Cha's evocation of female universalism in the effort of narrating the self ("Nationalism").

The sounds. The sounds that move at a time  
 stops. Starts again. Exceptions  
 stops and starts again  
 all but exceptions.  
 Stop. Start. Starts.  
 Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise.  
 Broken speech. One to one. At a time.  
 Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.  
 Pidgeon. Semblance of speech.  
 Swallows. Inhales. Stutter. Starts. Stops before  
 starts.  
 About to. Then stops. Exhale  
 swallowed to a sudden arrest.  
 Rest. Without. Can do without rests. Improper  
 to rest before begun even. Probation of rest.  
 Without them all.  
 Stop start.  
 Where proper pauses were expected.  
 But no more. (75)

In the “Urania/Astronomy” chapter where this passage is found, two images of the human body in Chinese acupuncture are placed at the beginning of the chapter while pictures of the human respiratory system along with English explanatory terms are inserted in the middle of the chapter. The textual part of this chapter consists of sequences of seemingly random utterances in French and its English counterparts juxtaposed side by side. While the images present a neutral anatomy of the human

body, the inarticulate text—at first sight neutral and meaningless—reveals a pathos of trauma precisely in the repetition of the same words:

I heard the swans  
 in the rain I heard  
 I listened to the spoken true  
 or not true  
 not possible to say.

There. Years after  
 no more possible to distinguish the rain.  
 No more. Which was heard.  
 Swans. Speech. Memory. Already said.  
 Will just say. having just said.  
 Remembered not quite heard. Not certain.  
 Heard, not at all.

.....

There. Later, uncertain, if it was  
 the rain, the speech, memory.  
 Re membered from dream.  
 How it diminishes itself. How to Dim  
 inish itself. As  
 it dims.

To bite the tongue.  
 Swallow. Deep. Deeper.  
 Swallow. Again even more.

Just until there would be nor more of organ.

Organ no more.

Cries. (67, 69)

Nothing “represents” trauma more tellingly than recurrent broken memories and repeated fragmented utterances. My argument is that Cha inserts this chapter between the chapters on Korean colonial history (“Clio/History,” “Calliope/Epic Poetry”) and the chapter on Korea’s partition into two (“Melpomene/Tragedy”) in order to posit an other-than-political interrogation of these political events. Inarticulation wrapped in repetition materializes the impossibility of breaking from one’s inheritance.

*Dictée* meanders through numerous stories and enunciative positions. Very often the only connection between diverse historical occurrences is rendered possible by nothing other than material syntactical articulation. Or, words very often function as images. In the chapter of “Erato/Love Poetry,” the narrative fragments move between the story of a broken marriage and the story of St. Thérèse’s “marriage” to Jesus Christ. The autobiography of St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, lends itself to interpretive suggestiveness in the homophones soul/Seoul and Theresa (Cha)/ Thérèse. But more importantly, what links the seemingly unrelated events is the figure of victimhood that recurs in the text, a linguistic image materialized and highlighted by the capitalized word “VICTIM.” In other words, the text very often relies on the naming of an event for historical representations. Moreover, the text also relies on images for its articulation. The chapter opens with a picture of a Western woman standing in a garden with a sword in her hand and closes with a close-up shot of a woman in agony from the 1928 movie *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, thus literalizing the victimhood presented in the textual part. The function of images in-between words, then, is to punctuate the syntax of naming.

Paradoxically, the one indexical metacommentary in the book is a passage without any punctuation marks. At the end of the prefatory section are these lines:

From A Far  
 What nationality  
 or what kindred and relation  
 what blood relation  
 what blood ties of blood  
 what ancestry  
 what race generation  
 what house clan tribe stock strain  
 what lineage extraction  
 what breed sect gender denomination caste  
 what stray ejection misplaced  
 Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other  
 Tombe des nues de naturalized  
 what transplant to dispel upon (20)

These lines can be a series of questions or a series of exclamatory phrases, but there is not a single punctuation mark inserted. It seems that questions, exclamations, and statements have all become *and* inscribed each other's possibility. Translated into my own jargon: if exclamations suggest the overdetermination of postcoloniality, *Dictée* is trying to show that this overdetermination can be called into question. The three phrases on the opposite page further suggest the contingency of identification as naming seems to determine everything: "IN NOMINE [in (family) name] / LE NOM [the (given) name] / NOMINE [in name only]" (21). Yet, just as Rushdie's novels turn the conditionality of postcolonial overdetermination into a redemptive move, Cha's *Dictée* also finds ethical potentiality in the very overdetermination of

postcoloniality—that is, the arbitrariness of naming is redeemed by the ethical move of telling. And whereas historiographical representations are impossible, the act of making storytelling take place in the enunciative subject can break the cycle of being trapped in “dead time” while at the same time acknowledging the inevitability of haunting. In the “Elitere/Lyric Poetry” chapter, where the opening image of an eager crowd of Koreans suggests another political protest in the high time of political turmoil, the juxtaposed words articulate the ethical function of the female reciter Disease in the face of political traumas:

Dead time. Hollow depression interred    invalid to resurgence, resistant  
to memory. Waits. Apel. Apellation. Excavation. Let the one who is  
disease. Disease de bonne aventure. Let her call forth. Let her break  
open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again. With her  
voice, penetrate earth’s floor, the walls of Tartaurus to circle and  
scratch the bowl’s surface. Let the sound enter from without, the bowl’s  
hollow its sleep. Until. (123)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Ethos of Simultaneity:

#### Writing, Death, and Community in Taiwan Writer Dancing Crane<sup>1</sup>

*No democracy without the death drive. Now, there's a thought.*

--Simon Critchley, *Ethics—Politics—Subjectivity*

*The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done.*

--Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*

*To write is perhaps to bring to the surface something like absent meaning, to welcome the passive pressure which is not yet what we call thought, for it is already the disastrous ruin of thought. Thought's patience. Between the disaster and the other there would be the contact, the disjunction of absent meaning—friendship.*

--Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

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<sup>1</sup> For Chinese names and words, *pinyin* romanization will be employed in cases where the author's own practice of romanization is unavailable; otherwise the author's own romanization will be adopted with its *pinyin* counterpart provided in the Works Cited section. Also, unless an author publishes in English and arranges his/her name in the English way, Chinese names will be presented in accordance with the regular practice, with the family name preceding the given name. In the Works Cited section, a work originally published in Chinese will be thus indicated.



In this chapter, I will continue my inquiry into the ethical dimension of postcoloniality as a potential conception of non-identitarian community. My case study focuses on Taiwan for its multi-layered history and the exigency of the “identity” issue on the island in relation to race, ethnicity, regionalism, and nationalism. The writer I study presents an unusual reaction to the overflow of identities by proposing to return to the naked being. His conception of community, in brief, is instantiated by the simultaneity of singularities sharing the same time and the same space.

The UK-based journal *Postcolonial Studies*, in a rare event in non-Asian Studies fields in Western academia, devotes its July 2003 issue to the study of the globalized condition of Taiwan. In her introduction entitled “Globalization and the (In)significance of Taiwan,” the guest editor of the issue, the UCLA professor Shu-mei Shih, stipulates that for a place like Taiwan (“too small, too marginal, too ambiguous, and thus too insignificant” [144]), the deployment of Western theoretical idioms becomes a required move:

To put Taiwan on the map, so to speak, necessitates the deployment of Western-centric critical idioms. . . . *For non-Western powers such as China, discursive resistance to Western-centric idioms and ways of knowing and organising the world is expected and given due respect.* But for a marginal site such as Taiwan, discursive resistance would simply fall on deaf ears. (145; emphasis mine)

In this proposition, Shih apparently takes the liberty of essentializing the relationship between a place’s geopolitics and its discursive capacities as she assumes that countries like China are naturally entitled to, inclined to, and equipped with discursive

resistance while an essentially “illegible” place like Taiwan automatically begs for assistance from idioms of globalization.

A pragmatic undertone resonates in Shih’s argument in the sense that, for her, only when a place obtains the position of superpower can it begin to articulate its specificity: “In view of tensions with China, for Taiwan to have an increasingly globalised economy is to keep ahead of the development game, and to have a more globalised culture is to displace Sinocentric influence and invent new forms of trans-culture” (146). Besides, Shih is convinced that globalization will help launch a more lively multiculturalism in Taiwan: “Not that each ethnic community has equal access to the fruits of globalisation, but at least each can use globalisation for its own purposes, such as the aboriginal tribes using transnational networks to view their oppression in a comparative perspective and seek redress on the international level, sexual minorities forming transnational alliances, etc” (146). In other words, the penetration of globalization will make Taiwan “universal,” a process that downplays the specificity of any ethnicity or community inside Taiwan and yet can help promote the specificity of Taiwan in the international community.

Aside from an ostensible (anti-Chinese) essentialism, Shih’s argument leaps problematically from a descriptive level (“This urgency for globalisation, and its offshoot Japanisation, is perhaps indicative of a new culture—periphery dynamic in the new international division of labour” [146]) to a prescriptive level (“Nowhere do we see such an intimate conjunction of ideological, economic, political and discursive rationales for globalisation as in Taiwan. For Taiwan, globalisation has to be, period” [146]). In addition, she apparently confuses the phenomenon or prospect of globalization with the discourse on globalization and, as a result, preempts the need for globalization to be scrutinized by theory.

What is useful, however, is that Shih's proposition promises a sophisticated configuration of the dynamic between the local and the global—that is, to view the relationship between the local and the global not as hostile conflicts nor as incompatible alterities to each other, which is commonly assumed in globalization theory, but as a dialectic in which transformations can occur to both the local and the global. It can even be argued that this argumentation has been advanced tremendously by postcolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> That is, major-scale transformations of the local by global superpowers have transpired in colonization, and the superpowers, likewise, undergo changes through their encounters with the colonized local cultures (Chen Kuan-hsing, “Decolonization” 75-76). It is, therefore, too hasty and unwise to suggest that postcolonial studies has been superseded by the theory of globalization as the new idiom for contemporary cultural inquiry.

Instead of granting positivity to globalization *a priori* as Shih does, I propose that globalization be considered as one component in the exigency of the current cultural and political condition of Taiwan, which I will read as Taiwan's postcoloniality. I would like to depart, however, from critics who take advantage of what Slavoj Žižek calls the “radical contingency of naming,” which lets “naming itself retroactively constitute[] its reference” (*Sublime* 95). By the latter trajectory, I refer to critics who, appropriating the idioms of mainstream postcolonial studies, generalize Taiwan's national character as colonial throughout its entire history in order to champion the resistant or anti-colonial paradigm in modern Taiwan literature.<sup>3</sup> This reading ignores the literature of mainlanders by essentializing Taiwan literature as Taiwanese literature and Taiwanese literature as anti-colonial literature alone. The

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<sup>2</sup> For insightful discussions on postcoloniality and the local/global dynamic in Taiwan and Asia, see Chen Kuan-hsing, “Decolonization,” “Imperialist”; Liao Chaoyang, “Comments,” “Hybrid”; and Liao Ping-hui, “Applying,” “Problems.”

<sup>3</sup> Two major representatives of this approach are Chen Fangming and Qiu Guifen.

postcoloniality of Taiwan, as I view it, includes its overdetermined aspects such as the colonial experience, the process of its modernization, the ideology of modernity (the imperative to radically break from the past manifested, for instance, in Taiwan modernist poetry), postmodern cultural elements, and the phenomenon of globalization. Of central importance is the identity issue, which has developed around several axes: around racial differences (Aborigines versus the Han people as mainlanders, Hoklo-speaking Taiwanese, and Hakka-speaking Taiwanese all belong to the Han lineage); around ethnic divisions (between the Aborigines, Hoklo-speaking Taiwanese, the Hakka, and mainlanders); or around regional distinctions (Hoklo-speaking Taiwanese and Hakka-speaking Taiwanese as opposed to mainlanders).<sup>4</sup> “Postcoloniality of Taiwan,” then, does not point to a definitive referent nor suggest the arrival of a new era entirely clear of the “colonial” influence. Rather, “postcoloniality” serves as a contested signifier here in the sense that the problematic of the postcolonial in theory and the actual manifestations of the postcolonial constantly dialogue with or revise each other while at the same time being subject to reshuffling occasioned by the entry of new elements such as globalization.

Furthermore, by listing the above differences along racial, ethnic, and regional lines, I am not suggesting that these identity options define Taiwan’s postcoloniality

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that “native Taiwanese” (*benshengren* [“people from this province”]), in general, does not refer to the Aborigines on the island (who are now politically correctly called *yuanzhumin* [“indigenous peoples”]). Rather, the term usually refers to the Hoklo-speaking population (Hoklo is a dialect originally from the Southern Chinese province of Fujian) and, occasionally, to the Hakka as well. Hoklo, for a long time, is considered to be the Taiwanese dialect and Hoklo-speaking population the native Taiwanese, as opposed to Chinese mainlanders who went to Taiwan with the Chiang Kai-shek military around 1949, usually dubbed as *waishengren* (“people from other provinces”). It is not until recent years, after the lifting of the martial law in 1987 followed by the loss of ruling power of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) to the opposition, Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), first in local elections and climaxed in the presidential election in 2000, that the meaning of the term “native Taiwanese” or “Taiwanese” begins to undergo drastic transformations. Its new ramifications include serving as a neutral term for Taiwan citizens and residents, or as an emotional indicator for people who “identify with” Taiwan. For the sake of clarity, the term “Taiwan,” when used as an adjective in this chapter, indicates things or people of or from Taiwan the place, while “Taiwanese” indicates either the Hoklo dialect or the native Taiwanese population.

for sure. Rather, I propose to assess the limits of identity-driven politics popularized in present-day Taiwan and to address the question of community where “community” has long been equated with nothing but political identities. In this chapter, I would like probe into the possible conjunction between postcoloniality and an ethical community by reading Taiwan writer Wu He or Dancing Crane, placing his writing in a dialogue with Levinas’s and Nancy’s thinking as laid out in Chapter One. If progressive thoughts of, say, Spivak’s and Derrida’s have demanded that attention be paid to the absolute singularity of each being, Levinas and Nancy (especially the latter) propose to formulate a concept of community grounded precisely in absolute singularities. Their proposals challenge the usual conceptions of subjectivity, including that of psychoanalysis (which has already noted the constitutive lack of the subject) and that of politics of difference (which, in the final analysis, always lodges itself in a certain identity as the reference point for its political efficacy).

### **I. From (Anti-)Sinocentric to the Global to the Local**

The introduction of postcolonial theory to the intellectual and academic circles in Taiwan in the late eighties and early nineties provides useful idioms for articulating the political exigency in relation to national and cultural identification in literary representations.<sup>5</sup> Previously, the focus of literary criticism centered around presupposed struggles between Chinese Nationalism and non-Sinocentric ideologies. In literature of the fifties and sixties, aesthetic and generic choices between, say,

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<sup>5</sup> Postcolonial studies in Taiwan starts out primarily in the form of heated debates among literature scholars. They include arguments between Qiu Guifen and Liao Chaoyang regarding the applicability of postcolonial theory to the case of Taiwan in 1992 (see Qiu, “Discovering,” “We”; and Liao, “Comments,” “Hybrid”); debates initiated by a pro-Chinese scholar on the cultural and political choice between China and Taiwan in 1995 (see Chen Zhaoying, “Localization,” “In Search,” “Discovering”; Chen Fangming, “Colonial”; Zhang Guoqing; and Liao Chaoyang, “Victimhood,” “Hollow”); and finally a series of debates between Liao Chaoyang and Liao Xianhao (see their articles appearing in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* in the years of 1995 and 1996).

nostalgic reminiscences of childhood and military life in mainland China as well as explicit anti-communist works on the one hand, and conscious imitation of Western modernism on the other hand, are commonly read as political gestures. The elusiveness of modernist poetry, for instance, is usually interpreted as an escapism into metaphoricity or a silent protest under the authoritarian governance of the then-ruling Chinese Nationalist Party, Kuomintang (KMT), notorious for their large-scale crackdowns on ideological differences.<sup>6</sup>

Another landmark event fell on the mid-seventies, when a series of disputes around the social function of literature took place during the periods of 1973 and 1977-1978, respectively. Usually dubbed *xiangtu wenxue lunzhan* (“the Nativist Literature Debate”), these arguments (especially the second round) between the so-called “nativist” camp and their critics marked a critical point in the perception and anticipation of Taiwan literature. The nativist camp itself later split into two major cliques, one embracing a pan-Chinese ideology (represented by Chen Yingzhen) while the other equating “nativist” with either “realist” or “Taiwanese” (represented by Song Zelai, Wang Tuo, Yang Qingchu, and Ye Shitao) (see Yu Tiancong). What is loosely shared by these cliques, nevertheless, is their categorical demand for anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, nativist, and nationalist consciousness from writers—though the nationalism of the pan-Chinese clique, naturally, differs from that of the Taiwanese clique. One major significance of this critical move is that, at least in the Taiwanese nativist clique, nativists’ appeal marks the first collective attempt in the post-1949 era to position Taiwan literature within the context of an internal-external conflict—that is, China is no longer viewed as an internal problem, but as an externally imposed

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<sup>6</sup> It is not until recent years that evaluations of literary production from the fifties on begin to address aspects other than political ideologies. Critic Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, for instance, painstakingly argues that the pursuit of modernism marks not so much writers’ anti-oppressive escapism as their countering move against bourgeois kitsch (*Transformations* 7-36, 196-210).

violence. Critic Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang calls the literary ideology of the nativist camp a literature of resistance very similar to the third-world literature (*Transformations* 15). As mentioned above, even when modernists from the fifties onward assertively adopt Western aesthetics, their works, more often than not, are considered in relativist terms as being born of an anti-Chinese pathos. The Nativist Literature Debate, however, accelerates the conceptualization of Taiwan literature in conjunction with global geopolitics—aside from communist China’s threat and the KMT government’s authoritarian rule as an outsider regime, the first-world cultural and economic hegemonies have now also joined the equation.

Another significant corollary of the Debate is that, since then, more *bentū* (“localization”) movements are encouraged, among which include efforts to restore and reassess anti-colonial literature produced during the Japanese colonial rule (years 1895-1945). While the call for nativist Taiwanese consciousness, along with the attention to literature from the colonial period, for the most part, borders on the establishment of a native-Taiwancentrism to be pitted against literature produced by mainlanders, what should not be neglected is that all these moves render possible a literary genealogy pivoted on the conflicts and connections between the local and the global, that is, a genealogy beyond the earlier pro-Chinese or anti-Chinese parameters.

The concept of the “global” demands qualifications. First of all, drawing attention to the emergence of global horizons in the consideration of modern Taiwan literature by no means valorizes the superiority of such parameters. Rather, I focus on the significance of the move away from the Sinocentric scope to other possibilities in Taiwan literature’s self-positioning. Secondly, the relationship between the local and the global varies and acquires complexity with time. In the seventies, for instance, nativist writers appeal for engagement with the native and the local vis-à-vis Japanese and Western imperialism as well as the hegemony of communist China. Later on, as

Taiwan literature begins to manifest various ramifications of global influences (concrete examples include aesthetic adoption of magic realism and metafiction, thematic fascination with urbanism, cosmopolitanism, minority identity politics, feminism, environmentalism, and queerness), the “global” register in Taiwan literature comes closer to what is generally understood as “globalization” today. Yet, as argued above, the dynamic between the local and the global is not to be viewed mechanically as a permanent conflict between the two. Instead, as postcolonial studies has demonstrated in multifarious forms, the specificities of the local can strike back to rewrite the colonial power, and yet on the other hand are equally susceptible to the incorporation into the grand system of globalization sanctified by the colonial or imperialist power. Former colonial powers, in turn, are also subject to transformations brought about by their encounter with the local.

Thirdly, in the wave of globalization, literary creation does not merely “reflect” the heuristic aspects of a globalized economy and culture in contemporary Taiwan, but, more significantly, also articulates spontaneous responses to the phenomenon of globalization in intellectual and artistic circles. That is, cultural initiatives in present-day Taiwan, more often than not, arise out of the elite’s contact with foreign influences (see, for example, Liou Liang-ya for the direct impact of global gay, lesbian, and queer movements on Taiwan’s gay activism). Also, the Western theoretical discourses and trends introduced to Taiwan by Taiwan’s literary academics, most of whom receive advanced education in the West, to a great extent contribute to reconfigurations of intellectual momentum and activist politics on the island.

Last but not least, the incorporation of global horizons at the critical level, in effect, enhances the reconsideration of Taiwan’s self-positioning. Unlike previous inquiries into the relationship with China, however, the new idioms are complicated



because of the intertwining of multi-layered temporalities. The most predominant intellectual engagement in the post-KMT era is the inquiry into national, cultural, and ethnic *zhutixing* (“subjectivity”), *shenfen* (“identity”), and *rentong* (“identification”), with all these keywords borrowed from outside of Taiwan.<sup>7</sup> In this move of Taiwan’s self-enunciation, “China” has not lost its status as a cultural imaginary or as an empty signifier (the big Other). Yet the post-KMT status of Taiwan renders possible attempts of self-positioning around axes including but not limited to the old issue of unification/independence. The China issue has always involved questions of what constitutes the condition for unification or independence: whether it is national/racial origins (“We are all of the Chinese origin”), cultural nationalism (“We Taiwanese for four hundred years have developed a distinctive cultural character and history from the mainland Chinese”), liberalism or pragmatism (“The foundation of a nation can be something other than racial/national essence—for instance, a commonly identified goal such as the protection of human rights and the pursuit of freedom”). Now, with the vitality of localization movements, more visibility of minority discourses, susceptibility to Japanese and American influences, and economically entwined relationship with China, the question becomes much more complicated.

With multifarious discourses contesting the politically and historically correct position, what should be noted is that the majority of these discourses operate with terms of conventional identity politics in the sense that the mechanism of “differing” has to be turned on in order to distinguish “us” from “them.” Even though demands for “community” (a more popular term is *mingyun gongtongti* [“body/entity of the

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<sup>7</sup> Relevant documents are too numerous to cite. Aside from discussions in the literary circles (see note 5), for a sampling of intellectual engagements in this issue in social sciences, see Institute of Modern History; Zhang Maogui; Foundation for Modern Academic Research; Xu Xinliang; Shao Zonghai; Shi Zhengfeng; as well as journal *Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Sciences* (especially Issues 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, and 26); and journal *Isle Margin* (Issue 8). For a critical summary of related discussions, see Jiang Yi-huah.

same fate”]) are vocalized everywhere, each discourse group very often posits its own political agenda as the condition for commonality with the following logic: “As long as you identify with our goal, you are more than welcome to join our discussions about community.” The problem is that mechanism obsessed with what exactly constitutes a community (be it race, nation, nation-state, or ethnicity) always risks being trapped in the myth of (in)authenticity. In this case, “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” virtually are nothing but two sides of a coin because any attempt to define “Taiwanese” as “X and X only” is most likely to invite queries such as “What *precisely* is X?”—which, then, can lead to infinite similar queries on the components and subcomponents of X, and so on and so forth.

## II. Whither the Subject amongst National Identities?

It is in the midst of vehement contests for authenticity that someone pen-named *Taiwanren* (“Taiwanese”) puts forward the idea of the “fifth” ethnic group in Taiwan, called “the fake Taiwanese”:

Fake *Taiwanren* do not possess any subjectivity or essence; nor can they form any center or be represented/re-presented. They are a group without ethnic history or tradition, a (post)modern group constituted by broken, fragmented, and chaotic signs and experiences. What are you? Taiwan mainlanders? Taiwan Hakka? Taiwan Aborigines? Taiwan Hoklo people? Why so lame? Why don’t you join us and become the fake *Taiwanren*? We are having anal sex, we are dancing, we are shitting and peeing wherever we like, we are farting, we are making trouble, we are stealing public properties, we are fooling around, we are hanging around, we are doodling. . . . (What about you?) We (all) are fake *Taiwanren*. (45)

Apparently tired of the self-righteousness of current discourses on identity, *Taiwanren* suggests jettisoning all the grandiose jargon along with the difference-generating identity politics proposed by the jargon.

A less sarcastic proposal is put forth by major literature scholar Liao Chaoyang. Inspired by Lacanian psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek, Liao suggests conceiving subjectivity as a hollow site which is open to any transplant of “substance” and yet is not to be occupied by any given content substance perennially. The problem with current discourses on identity, Liao contends, is that once a sign enters the site of subjectivity and assumes itself to be the “substance” of the subjectivity rather than merely a sign at the formal level, what usually ensues is the self-absolutization of this sign into a superego (“Victimhood” 118-21; “More” 105-09; “Question” 120-23). Liao’s proposition can help dissolve the logical tension between essentialism and constructionism: the placeness of this subjectivity and its necessity to be filled by a “substance” can be regarded as the “strategic essence” of the subject while, on the other hand, the constant moving in and out of the substance constitutes the construction of a subjectivity.

Liao’s argumentation, however, is not so much an appropriation of Žižek as his own creation. In the Žižek passage that Liao claims to draw on, the chapter on Kant and Hegel in *Tarrying with the Negative* (9-44), Žižek is in effect elaborating on the inherent splitting constitutive of the Enlightenment and modern “subject” from Descartes, Kant, to Hegel and Marx, a configuration that finds its climactic articulation in Lacan. The pivotal point in Žižek’s theorization rests in his deepening of the Lacanian conception of the barred subject (\$). Žižek’s departing and ending point is that Lacanian psychoanalysis provides an intelligent way to “reconcile” the classic problem of the relationship between the individual and society by laying bare the very splitting that constitutes both: “I can communicate with the Other, I am

‘open’ to him (or it), precisely and only insofar as I am already in myself split, branded by ‘repression,’ i.e., insofar as (to put it in a somewhat naïve-pathetic way) *I cannot ever truly communicate with myself*; the Other is originally the decentered Other Place of my own splitting” (31; emphasis in the original). In other words, the individual and society (as the big Other) not only share a structural similarity (“the very splitting that runs through both of them” [30]), but also hold a metonymic affinity (as society marks the site of the individual’s originary splitting).

In this light, one can say that the problem with most of the discourses on identity in Taiwan (their insistence on authenticity in its commonplace sense, as mentioned above) lies in their inability to displace their conceptions of authenticity with, say, Heideggerian notion of authenticity insofar as the latter indicates an originary impossibility to get to the “true” kernel of the subject as its constitution. In Žižek’s words, the sign of the subject’s survival of the Law of the World is that the Other intervenes in the subject’s act of externalization or self-objectivization so that the subject cannot achieve a complete identification with the act. For a “successful” self-externalization (that is, a thorough transformation of the subject into a thing) would entail the collapse of the inside and the outside (“the Law of my Heart” and “the Law of the World”) and would henceforth render the subject radically out of touch with “reality” (31-32). In this reasoning, discourses on identity which enunciate from the position of a self-claimed “authentic” identity substance would obtain what Žižek describes as a radical self-externalization and could only be apprehended and consumed inside their own acts.

What is confusing in Liao’s proposition is the metaphor he employs, hollowness: “In the process of constructing cultural identities, the real *a priori* subject is in effect is to be a blank without any substantial content” (“Victimhood” 118)—a metaphor very different in both denotations and connotations from the

psychoanalytical “lack” with which he equates his “hollowness” (119). To say the least, “hollowness” connotes a blankness awaiting the (positive) filling of meanings without necessarily implying any relationship between the subject and the Other or the Lacanian Real, while “lack” indicates the inaccessibility to originary wholeness constitutive of the subject. The modern subject does not really emerge as a blank. Quite the contrary, the subject is overdetermined by constant interventions of signifiers from the outset; its lack, in other words, is mediated and informed by these interventions. Moreover, the configuration of this “hollow subjectivity” seems ambiguous. Liao’s conception, on the one hand, indicates a spatial form which allows the coming and going of any identity substance. Yet on the other hand, it also points to an agency which is responsible for the moving in and out of the identity substance, and which is at the same time the very receiver of this substance.

In addition, although he does not deny the significance of irrational elements, Liao’s notion of hollow subjectivity basically does operate at the rational and representable level (even though he unclearly stipulates that the very hollowness of the subjectivity can transcend rationality to become the support of rationality [“Victimhood” 118]). Finally, Liao places an accent on the autonomy of the subject-agent in deciding on the substance of identification (“Victimhood” 119; “More” 105), neglecting the possibility of the subject-agent’s being interpellated by the ideological mechanism of the Other. My argument is that, instead of being a blank from the outset, the modern subject in effect emerges as a traversed subject precisely because of some “originary” content substance constitutive of its entity, including the primary lack occasioned and mediated by the subject’s separation from the Mother Other, the supply of “meanings” proffered by other ramifications of the big Other, as well as ideology—ideology not as a false consciousness or fantasy, but as something filtered by a series of noumenal, rational, and perceptual mechanisms on the part of the subject

and accepted by the subject as part of its “consistency” (for this perception of ideology, see Žižek, *Sublime*, ch. 3).

Liao’s proposal of hollow subjectivity is singled out here for detailed scrutiny not really because he is a leading critic in Taiwan, but because what he addresses here is exactly the point of intervention that my research has intended to posit and advance. Liao is able to see the impasse of identity-politics-oriented trajectories in current cultural inquiries. Without articulating it, his theory puts forth a possibility of conceiving political identities through returning to the “originary” level of existence in subject formation, namely, the level where the ontological, the phenomenal, the noumenal, and the apperceptional can be considered altogether. The lack of elaboration on this invention, however, makes his proposition a little vague to imagine. Moreover, that his notion of hollow subjectivity intimates a collective, rational, and free agent also invites doubts about how far his proposal eventually departs from identity politics.

To follow on my argumentation in the previous chapter, I propose that what should be contested at this moment are the stakes of confining the conception of the Self-Other dynamic solely to rational and political dimensions even if, indeed, the central issue appears to be a political exigency such as the identity issue in Taiwan. One of the major problems of identity politics or politics of difference has been that each identity group demands a representative/represented position in the system based on a set of essences or constructs—the difference between the two is virtually slim as constructs may very well turn into fetishized essences for a given identity group. The impasse of such politics, then, lies in the irreconcilable interests among different identity groups. While it may be true that at the empirical level, political conflicts seek solutions through questioning, critique, judgment, antagonism, contestation, and struggle (Critchley, *Deconstruction* 236), political antagonisms, more often than not,

are resolved by a certain kind of “violence”—if not totalitarian silencing of differences, then the power of the majority in democratic votes. My argument is the advantage of politics also names its greatest limitation—that is, questioning, antagonism, contestation, and struggle always have presumed a Self-Other conflict.

It is precisely this situatedness in a political exigency that invites considerations of parameters beyond political rationality.<sup>8</sup> The aim of this chapter, then, is to explore ethical thinking for a politically-mediated condition and seek communications between politics and ethics. In Chapter One, I have analyzed Levinas’s ethics and Nancy’s notion of community, hoping to address the limits of postcolonial identity politics via their thinking. Yet if there is anything inconvenient about their writing, it’s the abstraction. In my textual analysis that follows, I would like to demonstrate that the writing of *Dancing Crane* comes very close to articulating what Nancy and Levinas have deliberated on. Like Rushdie and Cha discussed in previous chapters, *Dancing Crane*’s configuration of the postcolonial community is best instantiated in the material characteristics of writing—this time, a writing of contemporaneity or simultaneity.

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<sup>8</sup> What deserves a mention is that major cultural studies scholar Chen Kuan-hsing in effect has already addressed the question of ethics within the context of Taiwan (see both “Imperialist” and “Decolonization”). Chen points out that the problem with scholarly discussions of postcolonial identity in Taiwan since the nineties lies in the confinement of the new imaginary to the question of unifying nationalism versus pro-independence nationalism. Chen proposes a “critical syncretism” to be coupled with the concept of “post-nation,” which he brilliantly translates as *po guojia* (“broken nation”). Unlike Bhabha’s “hybridity,” which registers elitist postmodernism and lacks a political intentionality, Chen’s emergent postcolonial syncretism is a project of “becoming others,” that is, to “internalize the selfhood or subjectivity of the colonized as (minoritarian, not majoritarian) others, to internalize females, aborigines, homosexuals, bisexuals, animals, the poor, the black, the African, etc., to integrate various cultural elements into the subjectivity” (“Decolonization” 107). He calls this move an ethical principle. While I agree with Chen on his critique of nativism and identity politics, I have reservations about his figuration of “internalizing others into the emergent subject.” For the subject here remains the center of cognition, political choices (it decides what is to be internalized), and production of cultural imaginaries. A less “violent” project than most practices of multiculturalism (if the latter indicates the hegemonic group’s collecting of minority cultures for a triumphant display), Chen’s proposition, at least at the figurative level, still pivots on the traditional concept of subjectivity.

### III. Writing Simultaneity: *Remains of Life*

First published in the seventies, Wu He or Dancing Crane disappeared from the literary circles for over ten years before resuming publication in the early nineties. Emerging from a time when the Nativist Literature Debate is at its most heated, Dancing Crane's writing is often evaluated against the two major literary trends dominating the critical forum at that time: modernism and nativism. Major critic Ye Shitao, for instance, calls him a "born Taiwan(ese) writer" (254-55) while another leading critic, Yang Zhao, contends that Dancing Crane's is a "nativist modernism" and that he has never strayed away from "the "modern(ist)-native(ist) trajectory" (169-78). Dancing Crane's writing, however, proves the dichotomy between nativism and modernism tremendously shaky not by incorporating both trends in his work, as Yang Zhao claims, but by ignoring the necessity of such a predetermined demarcation (Wu He and Yang 131). Readings like Yang's, in particular, expose the limits and problems of imposing the same critical framework repeatedly upon Taiwan writers in the last five decades.

*Yu sheng* or *Remains of Life*, according to the author, is inspired by a small memorial stone called "Remains of Life" set up by residents of the now Lushan and former Musha, the site of an aboriginal conflict with Japanese colonizers in 1931. Unlike the official monument memorizing the incident, this "Remains of Life" stone "is of the height of an average healthy elementary school kid, exuding no angry protest against injustice nor glorious celebration, only a self-effacing attitude almost to the point of humility" (Wu He, *Remains* 185; "Go On" 93).

According to official records, on October 27, 1931, the chieftain of the Mahebo sub-tribe of the Atayal tribe, Mona Rudao, led approximately three hundred warriors from six sub-tribes to attack the Japanese residents and soldiers in Central Taiwan, killing one hundred and thirty-four of them. In revenge, the Japanese



mobilized nearly seven thousand fully armed soldiers and policemen to hunt down their attackers. Up to November 11, over six hundred tribesmen from the six rebelling sub-tribes—approximately half of the entire population—either were killed in the battles with the Japanese or committed suicide, the chieftain included. This is known to be the Musha Incident. Some five-hundred-odd tribespeople surrendered in the uprising and were detained by the Japanese. Nearly half a year later, another mass killing took place. A sub-tribe that was believed to be the enemy of the six rebelling sub-tribes attacked these detainees and killed nearly two hundred of them. The remainder of the survivors were later relocated in *Chuanzhongdao* or Riverisle,<sup>9</sup> where the author found the unassuming “Remains of Life” stone monument.<sup>10</sup>

The official history rarely mentions the “Second Musha Incident.” Even when it does, the Japanese’s secretive encouragement is usually said to be responsible for the Second Incident. It is the insignificance of the Second Incident that stimulates Dancing Crane’s curiosity. Major critic Wang Der-wei suggests that it is through probing into the Second Incident that we can “release the subject-position of the Aborigines’ cultural memory” (32). This is a similar reasoning as Ranajit Guha’s in the latter’s study of the Indian peasant rebellions during the British colonial rule. Seeking to write histories for the historically marginalized subaltern classes, Guha as the leader of the influential Subaltern Studies Group strongly believes in the restorability of the “will and reason” or consciousness of the allegedly religiously-motivated rebels (46). This confidence in the retrievability of the formerly silenced, however, is questionable. As Spivak acutely points out in her seminal study of the sati sacrifice in colonial India, what should be questioned is the legitimacy of questions

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<sup>9</sup> The only English translation available of *Remains of Life* is an excerpt translated by Michael Berry. All translations in this chapter will be mine unless otherwise noted. I will, however, follow Berry’s translations of most of the names and places.

<sup>10</sup> For an English account of the Musha Incident, see Leo Ching.

posed on the legitimacy of the sacrifice, including the British imperialist's voice of morality and humanism vis-à-vis the repression of women, as well as cultural relativists' discourse on the sati widow's "agency."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, what should be questioned is whether or not it is possible to "release" the "subject-position" of the Aborigines in the Musha Incident. Some critics have suggested reading *Remains of Life* in line with conventional identity politics of representation (Liou Liang-ya, "Possibility"). I argue for the contrary. What is foregrounded in the novel is in effect valorization of a non-identitarian and non-representational moment in the midst of all the clamorous demands for identitarian definition. While such valorization is already manifest in the novel's ultimate call for humanism (respect for human life) and ecologism (respect for nature), what is more noteworthy is how this non-identitarian, non-representational community is materialized in the act of writing, especially when this writing highlights a kind of simultaneity. Dancing Crane claims that *Remains of Life* sets out to write (not to "represent," but to "write") three things: first, the accuracy and legitimacy of the Musha Uprising led by Mona Rudao as well as the real "cause" of the second Musha Incident; secondly, the "search" journey of the Girl living next to the narrator/author when he is staying in the tribe village for his research; and thirdly, the "remains of life" the narrator/author witnesses in the village. The author stipulates that he has sought to toss, turn, and write about these three things *repeatedly*, not for the sake of the artistic time in novelistic writing, but, rather, because the three things all exist in "the simultaneity of the 'remains of life'" (Afterword 251). My argument is that the very act of writing as manifest in the novel realizes the kind of pre-subjective, originary community *qua* "being-with" that Nancy proposes (*comparusion* or "co-appearing"). Even though this writing, to a great extent, does center around "political"

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<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern," *Critique* 198-311.

issues such as conflict with the colonizer, the novel pays more attention to the significance of looking back to the “prior” moment in the configuration of community, the moment when what is “in-common” is based not so much on political alignment as on the very fact of being finite beings at the same time and in the same place.

The choice of the narrative language in the novel already suggests a non-identity-politics move. The very word that *Dancing Crane* reiterates—“simultaneity (*tongshi xing*)”—is anything but the authentic language of the Aborigines. It exudes an intellectualism if not artificialness.

Secondly, the narrative sequencing is noteworthy in its creation of a sense of concurrence. Over two hundred pages written as one single paragraph with few sentence breaks,<sup>12</sup> the first-person point-of-view narrative meanders through what is being encountered, seen, heard, and reflected upon during the narrator’s stay in the little village of Riverisle. Although in Chinese writing the comma can also serve as a sentence break, I venture to think that *Dancing Crane* uses complete-sentence periods limitedly for a particular reason. Sparseness of sentence breaks can enhance the figuration of simultaneity in writing. For one thing, the storytelling never seems to end; the enunciation takes place as the present of the story being narrated.<sup>13</sup>

The possible historical, psychological, and emotional motivations behind the Musha Incident trigger the narrator’s probing. What he does is to let different voices be presented as they are instead of occupying a central position of enunciation. The narrator’s first encounter is Girl:

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<sup>12</sup> Berry points out that the excerpt he has translated, approximately one-sixteenth of the entire novel, consists of only three complete sentences, which complete the first theme the author intends to deliver (102).

<sup>13</sup> My translation tries to duplicate this characteristic by using limited sentence breaks. Moreover, to foreground the “simultaneity” as both a thematic and structural thrust in the novel (the “present-ness” of the original text is forcefully enhanced by the lack of verb conjugation in Chinese grammar), my translation will use the English present tense for the most part.

Winter 1997, one day the Girl living next door to the place I rent in the village says to the misty mountains in the distance, “I am the granddaughter of Mona Rudao,” Girl’s door is always left half open, the spirits of the ancestors can arrive at Riverisle following the twists and turns down Valleystream, during those difficult times, the spirits of the ancestors keep them company every day, Girl believes that as long as one follows the valley upstream, one can arrive at a Mystery Valley—the place where her ancestors jumped off a cliff to their death one after another. . . . (*Remains* 43)

Girl’s self-claimed genealogy is questionable as all of Mona Rudao’s descendants are believed to have died in the conflicts except for his daughter Mahong. Girl’s appearance, however, would materialize the narrator’s role as a relay for others. For Girl’s dream (“One day I will set out and look for . . .” [44; ellipsis in the original]) later would be taken up by the narrator. The trope of “setting out and looking for,” with the ultimate goal of the “looking for” unknown, further names the drive behind the narrator’s writing.

The question of “legitimacy” around the Musha Incident turns complicated as the narrator comes across more and more accounts. Two Atayal intellectuals, for instance, reject the idea of “uprising” and see the Incident as nothing but a traditional ritual of *chucuo* (“headhunting”). The official history politicizes the headhunting practice to sanctify the anti-Japanese discourse, according to the two intellectuals: “There is no ‘massacre’ in the primitive vocabulary” (47). On the other hand, one of the elders alive insists on the heroism of Mona Rudao and regards the Incident as a resistance to oppression out of the Aborigines’ pride. The elder considers the Incident in a most “civilized” manner. He even wishes that Mona Rudao could have “waited for civilization for fifteen more years” so that his descendants would not have to

relocate and live in an ugly tourist spot, which is what the Riverisle has turned into today: the famous hot spring resort Lushan (53-54).

Later, the narrator comes across a self-exiled wanderer who claims to have met someone who calls himself the grandson of Mona Rudao and the son of Mahong, Daya. The story of Atayal women's committing suicide or abandoning their own children during the Incident comes to the fore. According to official historiography, Atayal mothers, during the anti-Japanese battles, gave up on themselves and their children in order not to burden the warriors. Mahong allegedly dropped two sons off the cliff. The Daya in the story claims that he survived being abandoned by being miraculously rescued by a church minister, who later sent him to South America to avoid persecution. Mahong herself, survived too, could not forgive herself for not having died with her father and brothers, and often disappeared in the deep woods in the remains of her life. In the narrator's retelling of the wanderer's retelling of Daya's telling of his and his mother's survivor stories, the irrationality of these mothers' abandoning their children is foregrounded as a contrast to the female wisdom and loyalty stressed in official historiography: "The mothers of Mahebo stampeded with a fear for death in the misty thick woods, the first mother hanged or dropped her child, followed by the second, the third, out of a kind of collective hysteria, which ultimately led to a collective suicide with people jumping off the cliff together . . ." (70). By giving away the enunciative authority, the narrator steers from the righteous undertone implied not only in official history but also in subaltern-concerned historiography such as Wang Der-wei's attempt to retrieve the subject-position of the Aborigines. On the other hand, by relaying a multi-layered story, the narrator lays bare not so much a personal trauma (Mahong's or Daya's) as a collective narrative whose pathos lies in the lack of a definitive authority.

As mentioned above, the narrator/author sets out to write about the legitimacy of the Musha Incident, the Girl's journey, and the "remains of life" that he witnesses among the exiled Atayal descendants in that these three, for him, exist in "the simultaneity of the 'remains of life'" (Afterword 251). Dancing Crane himself is not clear as to what exactly constitutes this simultaneity. If anything, he has emphatically voiced his concern with history-writing. For him, there is no writing history from the temporal perspective of the historical event in question; each history, rather, is a writing by *dangdai* ("the contemporary") (Wu He and Zhu 28-33). Dancing Crane's wording in Chinese can be ambiguous and polyphonic. He says that there is no *lishi de lishi* (which can be read as "history of history," "history by history," "history written in historical time," or "historical history"); there is only *dangdai de lishi* ("history of the contemporary," "history by the contemporary," or "history written in the contemporary") (Wu He and Zhu 28-33; Wu He and Yang 148, 154-55).<sup>14</sup>

In the novel, the "contemporary" is present not as a static temporal marker or a time-indicating element in the syntactic structure, but as an independent "enunciative subject," which I read here as both the subject of the enunciated and the enunciating subject:

. . . the entire mountainous village is submerged in endless silence after the cockcrow, if [only] Mona Rudao could have waited for fifteen years, the "contemporary" asks why Mona Rudao could not have waited for fifteen more years, facts cannot wait for "if," the inquiry posed by contemporary history is either a humorous question or a wrong

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<sup>14</sup> One can compare Dancing Crane's view with Dipesh Chakrabarty's proposal of holding two gestures simultaneously on the historian's part (see the opening section of the previous chapter): one is to historicize the subject in the historical event "in the interest of a history of social justice and democracy," especially if the historical subject is from subaltern classes; the other gesture is to reject the temptation to historicize the historical subject and, instead, to see the historical subject as a figure "illuminating a life possibility for the present" (Chakrabarty 108).

question, the contemporary must “contemporarize” history, contemporary history examines history from contemporary multiple angles, but does not have the right to raise senseless questions, it can listen but need not inquire the third time of the cockcrow at dawn (sic) . . . . (55)

. . . in fact, I thought about conducting research on the Gigantic Stone Cave of Mahebo and the legendary Mystery Valley, but betraying Girl and focusing on research only is out of my elements, and the “contemporary” will not agree, although the “contemporary” stresses research and development . . . , it has its principles, the number-one principle being “respect for life” or “respecting life” . . . . (119)

. . . the contemporary tells contemporary history to remind me not to let a suspicious or controversial event be a bygone as a permanent “past tense”; instead, it has to be dug out and exposed under the contemporary sun until it becomes the “present tense,” the past history would, thus, become alive as part of contemporary history, the “contemporary” is so breastfully abundant or hipfully abundant that it is worth the name of “contemporary,” therefore “contemporary Musha Incident” or “Musha Incident in the contemporary” is not bogus, it is not only the core of the novel but also an appropriate historical view . . . . (85)

The “contemporary” is presented here as an enunciative position other than the narrator “I.” As a mobilizing agent in the syntax, the figure of the “contemporary” pointedly marks a departure from the traditional, particularly Cartesian, concept of

subjectivity (the subject that comes to being because of its cognitive ability of differentiating itself from the object). Making a time marker the enunciative subject, Dancing Crane's novel depresses the possible violence of a know-all, represent-all human agent.

The ethos of "contemporary writing" or "writing of simultaneity" is also poignantly materialized in the present-centered enunciative manner of the storytelling. As mentioned above, Girl's journey of search soon emerges as a major trope for the narrator's journey insofar as the latter includes not only his personal life experience but also his journey in search of the "contemporary" sense of simultaneity. Such a shared yet separated journey is literalized in the simultaneity of storytelling. In the following passage, Girl/the narrator reveal Girl's experience of prostitution in the city:

. . . she holds tight the warm bills in her hand and condemns two aged on-looking prostitutes, she then goes into the office to give the pimp's balls a good treat of Sedeq [a sub-tribe of Atayal] kicking . . . "Fuck it! I target at his balls when his ass is poking upwards," Girl turns her head and winks at me with her bright eyes, while the balls are in great pain and choked by human juice, Girl escapes "in an instant of silence," and it is already dawn when the cab taking her back to the village arrives, "Aiii, such a lame story of a good woman fallen into prostitution," I am as upset as helpless, "Indeed," Girl straightens her back in the seat, "Why would I be written in such a vulgar and lousy novelistic episode," . . . I return to my house to make coffee . . . I sip from the big flowery bowl until the afternoon, doing no thinking whatsoever, except feeling confounded as to why the novel would let such despicable and ugly reality "directly apply to" Dreamy Girl returning to her hometown.

(78)



What takes place here, I would like to argue, is not exactly avant-garde metafiction. Rather, it is a materialization of an intimate relationship between the narrator and other enunciative subjects, along with the narrator's anxiety over the ethics of storytelling.

Simultaneity is further manifest in numerous instances where the narrator's encounters with others trigger his "involuntary memory." Wang Der-wei has astutely pointed out the dual meanings of the word *yu* in the title *Yu sheng*: in Chinese, *yu* can mean "extra" on the one hand and "leftover" or "remainder" on the other hand, one indicating redundancy and the other insufficiency. Both possibilities, Wang contends, imply a lack in history, in community, as well as in the individual subject (Preface 8). In the novel, the narrator tries to drive home the message that many people, including urbanites, are in effect leading a kind of *yu sheng* ("extra/leftover/ remaining life"). When he shows eagerness to understand the Musha Incident from remaining tribespeople, one girl retorts that the Han people (the racial majority of the Chinese and Taiwanese population) are perhaps a much better topic for research. The narrator later ponders upon the difference he has thought to exist between his people and the descendants of the Musha Incident survivors:

. . . now it has occurred to me that in the contemporary moment many urbanites still live a post-war *yu sheng*, "You Han people have much more to be researched on," all of a sudden I remember the words of Girl's cousin, indeed, from the end of the [anti-Japanese] War to the 2-28 Incident to the White Terror of the fifties<sup>15</sup> . . . I am glad that history

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<sup>15</sup> Two months after the Japanese surrender to the Allies marked the end of World War II in 1945, the Chinese Nationalist Party, the KMT, sent Chen Yi to Taiwan to prepare for the reunification of the island with mainland China. It is generally believed, however, that Chen Yi's administration disappointed the Taiwanese tremendously for its corruption and lack of discipline. On February 27, 1947, the police killed an onlooker while attempting to check on suspicious cigarette traffic in Taipei. The next day, angry people gathered in front of the administrator's residence calling for reform. The governor responded by ordering a police crackdown, killing dozens of people. Soon, uprisings took

offers a Musha Incident so that I have a chance to come to Riverisle, to enjoy this small hot pot in warmth, solitude, and tranquility, this night I fall asleep despite the absence of Girl's nocturnes [Girl likes to play the music of Chopin], in the dream world are the hurried footsteps of Mahong in the depth of the woods . . . I wake up in the midst of the third cockcrow to a chicken-noisy, chicken-chatting world, can they be discussing last night's dream? the footsteps in the dream have run for the entire night into sole-dragging steps, trailing outside the curtained dream-frame, while a child I also woke up to the chicken noise in the backyard, this kind of waking experience lasted until teenage, when Mother was no longer able to raise livestock after falling ill . . . if I had never come to the foot of the mountain in Riverisle lying in bed amongst the earful of chicken noise, I might never remember the chicken in the backyard of our old house . . . (74-75)

The others' stories turn into the narrator's dreams which, in turn, initiate memories of his own past. Hence there is a very different ethos from what critic Chen Kuan-hsing has proposed as the project of "becoming others," of internalizing marginalized others into the subject (see note 8). With an aim to steer away from self-centered identity politics and nativism, Chen's proposal still posits the cognitive subject as the predicate of ethico-political possibilities. In *Remains of Life*, however, neither the narrator nor his story provider is foregrounded as the central site of enunciation; the narration proceeds in such a way that the subject of the enounced and the enouncing subject are constantly shifting, without any implication of hierarchy.

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place around the island. They met, however, with the KMT's large-scale crackdowns starting in early March. With no accurate numbers available, ten to twenty thousands Taiwanese are believed to have been killed in the crackdowns. This is what is later called the "2-28 Incident." The KMT's rule of terror continued into the fifties, a period usually termed the "White Terror" for its stringent ideological control.

Furthermore, what the above passage shows is not merely universalistic empathy (that everybody is leading a survivor's life). I argue that the writing here tellingly figures as the kind of community that Nancy has in mind: an ontological togetherness that is not predetermined by communion or communicative directness. It is a naked being shared by all. In Nancy's language, this kind of "inoperative community" is first and foremost registered in the co-existence in time and space:

"Togetherness" means simultaneity (*in, simul*), "at the same time."

Being together is being at the same time (and in the same place, which is itself the determination of "time" as "contemporary time"). "Same time/same place" assumes that "subjects," to call them that, share this space-time, but not in the extrinsic sense of "sharing"; they must share it between *themselves*; they must themselves "symbolize" it as the "same space-time" without which there would not be time or space.

The space-time itself is first of all the possibility of the "with" [in

"Being as being-with"]. (Nancy, *Being* 60-61; emphasis in the original)

Dancing Crane's writing, in effect, also helps illuminate an ambiguous but crucial part in Nancy's scheme, without which Nancy's thoughts can come across as stubbornly mystic and ignorant of the work of, say, the symbolic order put forth by psychoanalysis. When addressing the relationship between the Real and the symbolic, Nancy writes, "What happens to us . . . is the stripping bare of social reality, the very *reality* of being-social in, by, and as the symbolicity that constitutes it" (*Being* 57; emphasis in the original).<sup>16</sup> At first sight, the "reality of being-social" appears to be subordinate to symbolization. Critchley's interpretation emphasizes the etymological origin of *symbolon* as the joining together of what is broken, and therefore returns to

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<sup>16</sup> "la mise à nu de la réalité sociale—du *réel* même de l'être-social—dans, par et comme la symbolicité qui la constitue" (*Être* 79).

Nancy's ultimate claim that "*the manner in which social being faces itself, symbolizes itself, is as comparution*" (*Subjectivity* 245; emphasis in the original). My understanding of Nancy here is rather that being-social (which amounts to the fundamental ontology of "being-with") is indeed prior to being-political or being-Taiwanese, etcetera. Yet on the other hand, the priority/anteriority of such being cannot be revealed except in the form of symbolicity, which very likely emerges in a "perverse" form such as spectacle, communication, commodity, and technology (*Being* 57). The above passage from *Remains of Life*, for instance, attests to the naked being prior to the inscription of politics and yet at the same time names the fact that the naked ontology can appear only in the already-inscribed being—inscribed by politics and capital, among others.

In this light, the relationship between ethics and politics can also be further clarified. Ethics proposed by Levinas, Nancy, Derrida, as well as my proposition in this dissertation, is not born of a naïve ignorance of politics. Rather, ethics brings into light the fundamental imperative underlying all political activities, that is, the fact of our naked being and our being together. The writing in *Remains of Life*, as I have argued, exemplifies this ontology by a writing of the same time and the same place.

## AFTERWORD

In these pages, I have sought to conduct an epistemo-ontological inquiry into the stakes of difference in relation to postcolonial configurations of community. Seeing current postcolonialism's "homo-phobia" as a limitation, my study has examined writers who address the impossibility of difference and treat this impossibility as a postcolonial condition that promises a reconciliation between the postcolonial subject and history. In particular, I have chosen to focus on the material characteristics of these writers' writing—"writing" in these texts turns into an ethical moment when the subject explores what it means to be in common with others. My argument has been that one cannot locate the conceptualization of postcoloniality within the rhetorical parameters that have driven modern colonialist enterprises, namely, the problematics of difference.

With a wide variety of authors discussed, I have hoped to foreground the relevance among them through a gradual reasoning development. The chapter on Baudelaire, for instance, sets the tone for subsequent chapters not only because of the representativeness of Baudelaire for modernity's self-contradiction, but also for another reason. Baudelaire's lesbian figure has been named by Walter Benjamin as the allegory of the historical condition of modernity *and*, at the same time, the allegory of the critique of this condition. Such a duality, central to Benjamin's messianic conceptualization of history, has central relevance to the following chapter, where I have examined a similar hopeful, if not messianic, moment in Rushdie's allegorical understanding of history.

Benjamin à la Baudelaire redefines the ethico-political and epistemological aspects of allegory—that is, allegory names both a historical impulse and a commentary. For Benjamin, allegorical critique is possible primarily because allegory

involves a temporal difference. Yet, what faces the postcolonial subject is anything but a temporal distance from their colonial past, as is manifest in Rushdie's works.

In Rushdie, the impossibility for postcolonial to be different from the colonial past is often materialized in a narrative structure haunted by the same images. In Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work, *Dictée*, similar ethos prevails. I have argued that, in *Dictée*, the typical theme of earlier Asian American writing (namely, displacement occasioned by the duality of cultural register) is redefined as an ontological reflection on postcoloniality. The postcolonial, post-diasporic subject in *Dictée* survives the violence of colonial and migrant history not by resisting the haunting of the formidable Other (in this case, history), but by yielding herself to multiple others in a community that does not have a name. I also have proposed that the numerous moments of inarticulation in *Dictée*, instead of naming a resistance to cultural translatability, as many critics have contended, in effect shows an ethical experience as the subject seeks to reconcile with the Other whose name is incomprehensibility. In that chapter, I have engaged Jacques Derrida's writing on haunting and difference in my examination of time difference in postcolonial historical cognition. My proposition is that, for the postcolonial subject, history very often makes sense only retroactively in the midst of recurrent, repeated, and haunting metaphors. I see this temporal dimension as crucial to a positive configuration of postcoloniality, and I identify such a temporal sensitivity in all the writers I have discussed thus far.

Relevantly, in Taiwan writer Dancing Crane, I have maintained that his work approaches the possibility of community not only in relation to time but also in relation to the end of time. Finitude of the commodity, of the nation, and of the individual becomes the thread that makes a community possible. I conclude my study by proposing that the recognition of the finite community prevails in all the writers I

have examined, and that this recognition confirms the positivity of reading sameness into postcolonial community.

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